

International Development Cooperation and the Emerging Global Order

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Abstract

A little more than a year into the Trump 2.0 era, the “post–Cold War” international order as we know it is coming to an end. Amid increasing volatility and conflict, the shape and character of the order that will replace it are dangerously unclear. There are ambitions by so-called middle powers – including some member states of the EU – to provide an effective response, but questions remain as to their potential impact. Three scenarios can be envisaged: (1) an Orwellian dystopia dominated by three global powers – the United States, China and Russia – each with its own sphere of influence; (2) a “new Cold War” between two rival capitalist models: “Western” liberal democracy versus “Eastern” oligarchy and (3) the survival of the rules-based international order, possibly as a counterweight to oligarchic spheres of influence. For this scenario to materialise, middle powers must address the liberal order’s inherent weaknesses so that it delivers for all of its members. This discussion paper brings together 14 contributions drawing on the German Institute of Development and Sustainability’s (IDOS) broad regional and thematic expertise to examine these questions. The contributions analyse key actors, cooperation themes and regions. Each contribution analyses the implications of the changing global order for its specific area of focus and explores how international cooperation in general – and development cooperation in particular – can contribute to a more just and sustainable international system. The paper aims to provide readers with a range of perspectives on the state of international development cooperation and its possible evolution. Taken together, the contributions provide insights into the roles that international development cooperation may play in an emerging global order and identify priorities for reforms.

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Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BMZ	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
BRICS	Brazil, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Russia and the United Arab Emirates
CBAM	Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CBET	cross-border energy trade
CGD	Center for Global Development
COP30	30th UN Climate Change Conference, Brazil
CSO	civil society organisation
DC	development cooperation
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ENASS	L'École Nationale d'assurances / French National School of Insurance
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FNS	food and nutrition security
G77	Group of 77
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GNI	gross national income
GVC	global value chain
IDE	Institute of Developing Economies
IDOS	German Institute of Development and Sustainability
IEP	Institute for Economics & Peace
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFI	international financial institute
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPBES	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems
ITC	International Trade Commission
JETRO	Japan External Trade Organization

LDC	least developed country
MDB	multilateral development bank
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ODA	official development assistance
PDB	public development bank
PSIL	Private Sector Investment Lab
RIGVC	Research Institute for Global Value Chains
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDSN	Sustainable Development Solutions Network
SSA	sub-Saharan Africa
T7	Think 7
TFP	Total Factor Productivity
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNCTAD	United States Conference on Trade and Development
UNDEF	United Nations Democracy Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNU-WIDER	United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WEF	World Economic Forum
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

1 Introduction: development cooperation in the post–Cold War era

Mark Furness & Niels Keijzer

A little more than a year into the Trump 2.0 era, it has become apparent that the “post–Cold War” international order is in its death throes. For three decades, global affairs have been shaped by a system dominated by the United States as the world’s only genuinely global power. American power was embedded in a “rules-based” international order founded on respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, alongside liberal-democratic norms such as “free” global economic exchange and institutionalised governance. Led by the United States and its Western allies, this order was considered by some in the early 1990s to be the “end of history”, a supposedly final stage in human ideological, political and economic evolution (Fukuyama, 1989). While the order was never without its practical and moral failings, and although many countries did not benefit from its protection, it was widely considered an improvement over past systems for organising international interdependence. Today, however, the liberal internationalist project faces a profound crisis and is being challenged by geopolitical competition and a hollowing out from within (Ikenberry, 2024).

The stark reality of the end of the post–Cold War era was reflected in a speech by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos. Carney’s address made two critical points. First, he argued that the United States has repeatedly broken the rules and norms of the international order, fundamentally damaging the legitimacy of the system and the effectiveness of its own leadership. Whereas previous US administrations often justified breaches as necessary to protect the order itself, the Trump administration has abandoned the pretence that international law constrains its actions. Second, Carney issued a call for the world’s “middle powers” – the remaining liberal-democratic countries, as well as other countries that value and promote rules-based relations – to join together. He argued that this coalition must form a counterweight to the United States and other revisionist regimes such as Russia, thereby protecting what remains of international cooperation based on mutual respect for principles, norms and institutions (Carney, 2026). Carney’s appeal builds on a long tradition in international relations of middle powers acting as stabilising forces in global governance, using diplomacy and coalition-building to champion multilateral solutions (Cooper, 2013).

International development cooperation has been a key feature of the post–Cold War order. Following the wave of decolonisation in the mid-20th century, wealthy Western countries committed to supporting the socio-economic development of the “Global South”, with complex motivations and effects. Among the motivations behind the emergence of the global development agenda was the desire of Western countries to maintain access to resources in their former colonies. Development cooperation has contributed to unhealthy dependencies created by debt bondage and incentivised post-colonial exploitation in many countries, including by authoritarian elites (Ziai, 2025). At the same time, it has proved successful in many areas, including reducing poverty and addressing challenges such as food security, sanitation, education, public administration and public health (Chasanah, Gunawan, & Baroudi, 2024). After the turn of the millennium and guided by the UN Millennium Declaration and Millennium Development Goals, a shared commitment to global development among Western and Global South countries was reflected in the increasing aid budgets and significant development gains. The early years of this millennium also saw an increased engagement by non-Western countries, especially China. The high point of the global development agenda came in 2015 with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – a universally agreed and binding commitment to address a range of interrelated global challenges, from inequality and climate change to human security (UN DESA, 2016). This agenda emphasised that many sustainable development challenges transcended national borders and could only be tackled through international cooperation, while also recognising that all UN

member states needed to internalise and implement the agreed goals domestically. The year 2015 concluded with the adoption of the Paris Agreement on climate change, another key milestone linked to the 2030 Agenda.

Like the international order of which it is a part, the global development agenda is struggling. It is straining under the weight of its own complexity and an overload of demands and objectives, making it vulnerable to actors who oppose its underpinning norms. Ironically, the launch of the 2030 Agenda coincided with the increase in domestic pressure on international development policy in many Western countries. Several key drivers of the agenda, including the United Kingdom, Canada and France, have since cut their aid budgets and shifted mandates to prioritise other national interests. The most dramatic manifestation of this trend has been in the United States, where the second Trump administration has dismantled USAID and ended most American development and humanitarian aid programmes. The US Congress agreed to allocate \$50 billion in the 2026 budget, yet it remains unclear whether the government will use these funds in accordance with the criteria for official development assistance set by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee. This has left Carney's Western "middle powers" as the remaining champions of international development cooperation, together with China. Even in these countries, dramatic budget cuts have been accompanied by a strategic shift towards a transactional cooperation model that prioritises domestic interests over recipient needs (Heidland, Michael, Schularick, & Thiele, 2025).

With the post-Cold War order ending, the shape and character of the order that will replace it are dangerously unclear. Three scenarios can be envisaged.

The first scenario is an Orwellian dystopia dominated by three global powers – the United States, China and Russia – each with its own sphere of influence (Ikenberry, 2024). This scenario was widely discussed in the lead-up to the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos, which followed the US attack on Venezuela, President Donald Trump's musings about a "Donroe Doctrine" of US dominance of the Western hemisphere and his open designs on Greenland, which the Danish government said would amount to the end of the NATO alliance. In this scenario, China's sphere of influence would extend across East and Southeast Asia, while Russia would take control of Europe. Many middle powers, and presumably also much of the "Global South", would be drawn into one of these superpower-dominated blocs.

A second, related scenario is a "new Cold War" between two rival capitalist models: "Western" liberal democracy and "Eastern" oligarchy. The Trump administration's dealings with Russia over Ukraine have exposed an ideological affinity with an oligarchic system that does not restrict private rentier capital accumulation with inconvenient democratic norms and legal provisions. This new era is likely to be defined by the rise of "personalist regimes", where power is concentrated in the hands of individuals operating outside of formal institutions, often in concert with a small network of elites (Gunitsky & Sinanoglu, 2026). As with the Cold War in the 20th century, a "new Cold War" is likely to have dangerous "hot" conflicts. The devastating American and Israeli war on Iran and southern Lebanon illustrate the dangers posed by personalised regimes in supposedly democratic countries engaging in poorly planned, violent adventures without regard for domestic or international legal constraints. Given that many countries in the "Global South" function as oligarchic states, it is distinctly possible that this model is already taking shape, ushering in a new imperialist age with all the instabilities that plagued the 19th and 20th centuries.

A third scenario envisages the survival of the rules-based international order, perhaps as a counterweight to oligarchic spheres of influence. This outcome depends on many factors, including the extent to which Carney's vision for an alliance of middle powers is translated into an effective and legitimate reality, a potential retreat from oligarchic politics in the United States and the integration of Global South countries into a liberal rather than an imperialist order. For this to materialise, the middle powers must address the liberal order's inherent weaknesses so that it delivers for all of its members. This means finding better ways to manage global

interdependence: cooperation that serves mutual interests; showing the political courage to defend international principles, norms and institutions in all instances; reducing economic and social inequalities; supporting democratic governance in different cultural contexts, including by reforming international organisations to make them more effective and representative; and addressing climate change and other human-induced degradation of the natural environment.

In this context, some form of international development cooperation is likely to be crucial. This is likely to be led by the EU and its member states in concert with other middle powers such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and Canada, with engagement from other countries that are not liberal democracies yet pursue like-minded international agendas. To abandon development cooperation entirely would be to play into the hands of oligarchic, corrupt and anti-democratic forces. The question is whether and how this cooperation can meet the many challenges posed by the emerging global order. In addition to dealing with crises of varying degrees of immediacy, a key test case for this alliance will be discussions on what should (and could) succeed the 2030 Agenda, which are expected to start once the next UN Secretary-General enters office in the first months of 2027.

This discussion paper brings together 14 contributions drawing on the German Institute of Development and Sustainability's (IDOS) broad regional and thematic expertise to examine these questions. The contributions analyse key actors, cooperation themes and regions. Each contribution analyses the implications of the changing global order for its specific area of focus and explores how international cooperation in general – and development cooperation in particular – can contribute to a more just and sustainable international system. Like this introduction, the contributions do not represent any institutional position of IDOS as a whole, but reflect the expertise and analytical perspectives of the individual authors. The paper aims to provide readers with a range of viewpoints on the state of international development cooperation and its possible evolution. Taken together, the contributions provide insights into the roles that international development cooperation may play in an emerging global order and identify priorities and reforms that may help make a meaningful contribution to realising the third, more hopeful scenario.

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2 Germany's development cooperation reform in perspective

Tim Hailer-Röthel & Heiner Janus

The changing global order is reshaping the domestic politics of foreign aid. As many OECD governments shift their focus towards defence spending and narrower national interests, contributions to global public goods and development are declining. Development budgets, in particular, are traditionally among the first casualties of public spending cuts. Germany is no exception. Its core development budget has fallen from €12.4 billion in 2021 to €9.9 billion in 2026 – a decline of around 20 per cent. This decrease is driven by overall pressure on public spending and a decisive shift towards defence. A recent study projects a contested but illustrative estimate, suggesting that aid cuts could lead to an additional 9.4 million deaths by 2030 (da Silva et al., 2026).

In January 2026, Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) presented a reform strategy that directly addresses these pressures. The strategy advocates a shift towards a more targeted approach, shaped in part by these budget cuts. However, it also addresses long-standing reform needs that predate them. Three aspects are particularly noteworthy: a clear focus on least developed countries (LDCs), where aid can have relatively high impact; explicit thematic prioritisation that recognises over-fragmentation as a key problem; and a stronger commitment to evidence and results, anchored in the statement that “effectiveness and evidence are central principles for steering German development cooperation” (BMZ, 2026). Possible concrete steps towards achieving these goals can be found in a joint CGD–IDOS policy paper on prioritisation (Hughes, Janus, Mitchell, & Röthel, 2025). However, questions remain about the strategy, most notably the apparent tensions between the focus on LDCs and ambitions to promote German business interests, the vague implementation plans and the fundamental question of political viability: Can these reforms generate meaningful change within the German development cooperation system and its wider political authorising environment?

The political squeeze on aid

The budgetary picture is more complex than headline figures suggest. The US Congress has passed a \$50 billion foreign affairs bill, though it remains unclear whether these funds will be spent as intended, given the multiple bureaucratic process stages between commitment and disbursement. In Germany, meanwhile, the budget remains above its 2018 level. Development assistance is shrinking but not disappearing. The real challenge lies in directing the remaining resources to where they will have the greatest impact.

However, the squeeze on aid is not only budgetary; it is also political. While global dynamics such as geopolitical competition, the rise of personalist regimes and the erosion of multilateral norms are reshaping the global order, domestic forces are fuelling a political squeeze on development cooperation from two opposing directions.

Within the political left, there are recurring calls to expand the scope of what aid should achieve. Climate targets are added to health programmes, and governance conditions are layered onto infrastructure projects. The risk is that every intervention becomes a “Christmas tree” of maximalist ambition. As Brand, Furness and Keijzer (2021) observe, the development agenda is straining under the weight of its own complexity. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) epitomise this problem. As Adam Tooze (2025) has argued, they represent an attempt to organise the world around a spreadsheet of universal values rather than politics – a last gasp of the “end-of-history” mindset that, in practice, has delivered far less than it promised. In

Germany, projects targeting four or more SDGs have increased nearly tenfold over the past decade (Hughes et al., 2025). Such an increase may reflect changing reporting conventions, but it is also likely to add to project complexity. Our research indicates that this complexity comes at a cost: When donor bureaucrats are asked to pursue everything at once, effectiveness becomes a rhetorical device rather than an operational tool (Esser & Janus, 2025).

Within the political right, development cooperation is being reframed as a means of advancing narrow self-interest, including through migration deals, private-sector promotion and geopolitical competition. The idea of “mutual benefit” is intuitively appealing; the notion that aid can deliver returns at home particularly resonates with conservative and older voters. Yet these same groups tend to doubt that such benefits will materialise. A cross-country study commissioned by the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (Public First, 2025) reveals a striking paradox. In France, National Rally voters identified the easing of migration pressures as a key potential benefit of aid spending – yet most of them also believed that aid fails to reduce migration, or even exacerbates it. When Italian and French focus groups were asked whether aid could generate domestic economic returns, participants were blunt in their responses, doubting that such gains would ever reach “us little people” (Public First, 2025).

In short, arguments based on “mutual benefits” may sound persuasive in theory, but they do not appear to convince the voters they are intended to win over. Foreign aid occupies a peculiar space in democratic politics: Most citizens have limited knowledge of what it involves and little interest in finding out more (Janus & Röthel, 2025). When controversy strikes – such as the case of German-funded bicycle lanes in Peru or a UK grant for an Ethiopian girl group – the public encounters aid through anecdotes rather than evidence. In such a context, maximalist ambitions and instrumentalist framings flourish, hollowing out the political centre. In Germany, the cross-party consensus on development cooperation has visibly eroded.

Refocusing: pragmatic and realistic

What is missing, and worth establishing, is a realistic middle ground for foreign aid: a position of principled pragmatism. This echoes the call made by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos for the world’s middle powers to recommit to rules-based cooperation (Carney, 2026). In the context of development, this means avoiding both naive idealism and cynical instrumentalisation in favour of a centrist realism that defends the core purpose of aid: addressing people’s needs while being honest about what aid can and cannot do.

In a narrowing political space, the development sector must respond by sharpening its focus. Development assistance provided by major Western donors remains fragmented and is spread across too many countries and too many small projects. Glennerster and Haria (2025) demonstrate that a radical simplification involving fewer, larger and more evidence-based interventions can maintain high impact even with shrinking budgets. When applied to Germany, this means focusing on areas of comparative thematic strength and redirecting grant-based bilateral funding towards underfunded countries with the highest levels of extreme poverty (Hughes et al., 2025). It also means safeguarding multilateral channels, which have become more vulnerable in the wake of the US withdrawal from international development cooperation. Tighter budgets offer a rare opportunity for such reforms – precisely because continuing as before is no longer affordable.

Although many partner countries have been severely affected by sudden aid reductions, reactions have been more varied than is often assumed. Some governments of recipient countries have cautiously welcomed co-financing models that increase their ownership. As Ken Opalo (2026) has argued, nostalgia for the old aid paradigm can prevent an honest consideration of alternatives. Our research in South Africa supports this view: The country had already begun preparing for a reduction in US funding by the time those cuts materialised.

Therefore, the donor community must proactively shape the future of international cooperation, rather than simply defending the status quo.

Development cooperation in the emerging order

Of the three scenarios outlined in the introduction to this discussion paper – superpower-dominated blocs, a new oligarchic Cold War or a rejuvenated liberal order – the third is the one with which our proposed reorientation aligns most closely. However, we do not advocate this approach out of nostalgia. Development cooperation is downstream from much larger upstream forces: low trust in government, anxiety over living standards, a lack of domestic investment, and a widespread sense of inequality and disconnection (Public First, 2025). Building durable support requires addressing these deeper issues, which are beyond the remit of development agencies alone.

What development agencies can control is how they work. Our comparative research on government bureaucracies in general, including those in the United States and China, reveals that officials across geopolitical divides face remarkably similar pressures: demonstrating domestic relevance, avoiding the appearance of waste, and navigating between political demands and career concerns (Esser, Janus, Theisen, & Hailer-Röthel, 2025). Rather than being a reason for fatalism, these similarities are a reason to invest in what makes agencies effective in the long term, regardless of the current political climate.

Two elements are essential if development agencies are to improve in concrete ways, which is a precondition for generating trust among politicians and the public. First, there must be a focus on organisational learning because agencies that cultivate strong social practices for sharing knowledge adapt better than those that rely on individual learning alone (Janus & Esser, 2025). Second, a realistic approach to effectiveness is needed. Our research shows that bureaucrats in development agencies are overwhelmed by too many projects and too little time for reflection. Yet officials who are given space for calculated risk-taking and honest discussions about failure tend to perform better (Esser & Janus, 2025). Specifically, this means fewer, more focused interventions – and the organisational courage to acknowledge when something is not working.

Currently, much of the development community still exhibits dynamics that resist change: a siege mentality that repels constructive criticism and resists debate about the future of development cooperation. In doing so, the community risks accelerating the very loss of influence that it seeks to prevent. In an era of shrinking political space, Germany has the chance to demonstrate that a leaner, more focused development policy delivers where it counts. The most compelling argument for aid is not simply that it matters in principle, but that it works in practice.

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3 Shifting ideology or shifty tautology? The EU's policy on international partnerships in turbulent geopolitical times

Svea Koch & Niels Keijzer

The (non-)state of the EU's development policy

The changing global order presents a complex set of challenges for Europe and is shaping the context in which its development policy operates. Successive global crises, growing geopolitical uncertainty and a volatile international environment have placed the EU in a near-permanent “crisis mode”, forcing it to react to events as they arise and often challenging its usual decision-making processes.

For many years, the EU has often been compared to a slow-moving tanker in world politics, capable of significant influence but limited in terms of rapid decision-making and strategic agility. In recent months, however, the EU has become a think tank in international politics: passively commenting rather than actively shaping. Instead of influencing and steering global agendas through its strong rules-based institutions, the EU is plagued by a defensive siege mentality (de Wilde, 2025). Although the European Green Deal was once described as Europe's “man on the moon moment” in 2019, it turned out the spaceship never actually made it beyond Earth's orbit. Instead, the EU has rolled back aspects of its Green Deal ambition to reduce dependence on external inputs, including fossil fuels – a reversal that was already looking short-sighted long before Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz in March 2026.

The rapidly changing global order has created new urgency and new challenges for the EU. Foremost among them is the pursuit of greater strategic autonomy, or in the characteristically ambitious discourse of Ursula von der Leyen, “a generational project: European independence” (von der Leyen, 2026). This quest for independence is an ideological shift for the EU, given that the European project has been driven for decades by the post-war premise that promoting economic interdependence is a basis for prosperity and peace. Yet, what proved effective for Europe's own internal integration has been far less successful in its external relations, as Russia perhaps best illustrates. Striving to enhance Europe's resilience and strengthen its overall influence – spanning areas from defence and energy security to critical raw materials and strategic technologies, including digital infrastructure and software – has become a central reference point in European policy debates. The deterioration of the transatlantic partnership and the US administration's explicit intention to undermine the EU's fundamental values appear to have given the Union a final wake-up call to undergo this process of fundamental recalibration. This followed years of hesitation and delays.

Internally, it is no less challenging. Domestic political upheavals, the rise of populist movements and increasing political fragmentation in several member states have made it more difficult to form stable governments and maintain consistent political agendas. Political instability in key member states – combined with a volatile European Parliament in which the largest political group is actively normalising the far right – appears to have prompted the European Commission's prioritisation of short-term interests at the expense of Europe's long-term prosperity and sustainable development.

A further realisation for the EU is that Canadian Prime Minister Carney's message in his 2026 Davos address was correct: Nostalgia is not a strategy. This was publicly acknowledged by von der Leyen for the first time a few weeks later, when she highlighted that “Europe can no longer be a custodian for the old-world order, for a world that has gone and will not return”. The implications, she continued, must lie in “new ways of cooperating with partners” and in “seeking

more connections with reliable, trusted partners” (von der Leyen, 2026). This is where development policy comes in.

The shifting paradigm of European development policy

Surprisingly, development policy – or as it is commonly termed in Brussels, the international partnerships portfolio – has for now emerged politically stronger from the current crisis context. While almost all larger member states have cut their bilateral official development assistance (ODA) budgets, the European Commission was early in its call for a new understanding of development and for putting the EU’s interests first. Some argue that this approach allowed the Commission to request a substantial budget allocation for external action in the proposals for the next EU budget cycle, covering 2028 to 2034. The foundations for this shift were laid a decade ago at the November 2015 Valletta Summit on migration and the launch of a large Africa-focused trust fund, which was presented as being primarily in Europe’s interest. Subsequent initiatives have followed, with by far the most prominent being the Global Gateway initiative. This label for the EU’s investment engagement signals a move towards a more strategic and interest-driven approach that combines development objectives with infrastructure investment, economic cooperation and geopolitical considerations (Koch, Bergmann, Erforth, Hackenesch, & Keijzer, 2026). At the EU Ambassadors’ Conference in March 2026, the president of the European Commission highlighted that Global Gateway is “all about mutual benefits, and it is a means to develop partnerships and projects that advance our values” (von der Leyen, 2026).

Why does this need to be emphasised? The EU has long been a major actor in international development, both financially – as the world’s largest donor – as well as politically by seeking to shape key multilateral agendas such as the 2030 Agenda and climate initiatives (Keijzer, 2026). However, the growing role of China in development finance, particularly through its large-scale Belt and Road Initiative, has prompted internal debate about why the EU does so much yet receives so little recognition. China’s expanding presence in partner countries and the high visibility of its projects, including those its contractors implement for European partners, have led to renewed questioning of the EU’s approach. Recurring voting patterns in the UN General Assembly have raised uncomfortable questions about the geopolitical returns of Europe’s long-standing development partnerships.

This has led to the rethink outlined above, with influential voices calling for ODA to be used for instrumental purposes to enhance the EU’s geopolitical visibility, align more closely with European interests and integration more fully with foreign and security policy. The European Commissioner for International Partnerships went so far as to argue that ignoring EU citizens’ concerns in its decisions on international cooperation would erode the European project (Sikela, 2026). Many, though not all, member states have embraced this paradigm shift and are now not only scaling back their financial engagement but also increasingly focusing on economic and security interests in their development policy, with issues such as migration, economic competitiveness, and energy and raw materials security taking centre stage (Koch, Keijzer, & Friesen, 2024).

Although this can be seen as a survival strategy for development policy, the paradigm shift aims to fulfil two distinct purposes. First, against the backdrop of growing domestic scepticism towards international cooperation, the shift aims to strengthen domestic political legitimacy and appeal to national electorates. Second, these reforms seek to position development policy as a strategic instrument for securing geopolitical and economic influence. In an increasingly competitive international environment, it is intended to expand national and European room for manoeuvre, strengthen political presence in key regions and consolidate long-term partnerships in the Global South.

What is missing, however, is a clear political narrative for the EU’s overall development policy engagement, as the political dialogue within the EU on development has largely dried up. The

EU currently has a considerable ODA budget, but lacks a clear development policy (Keijzer, 2026). The EU chose not to articulate a clear agenda and narrative but rather sought to argue that these new approaches can coexist with its current commitments to global development agendas and with the principles governing EU development policy, as stated in the Treaty on European Union.

Therefore, a key issue that remains is how Europe can articulate a development policy that simultaneously strengthens domestic support for international cooperation while positioning development as a central instrument for building partnerships and alliances with countries in the Global South in an increasingly fragmented global order (Koch et al., 2026). However, the risks of an approach that is too pragmatic and overly transactional are clear, especially when Europe's partners feel that their own political priorities are not being taken seriously and Europe instead appears largely to be imposing its own agenda and implementing actors ("Buy European"). This may erode partners' trust in, and ownership of, cooperation with Europe. This could ultimately endanger the sustainability of cooperation results and weaken their contribution to the long-term and diverse partnerships on which Europe relies, while also wasting EU taxpayers' money.

Opportunities: be clear and specific rather than loud and generic

The EU's internal insecurity about its limited recognition by its partners explains why much of the political discourse on its international partnerships is targeted at a European audience. Yet, with many terms and priorities remaining undefined, this often comes across as lip service to international agendas while primarily advancing more particular European interests. To advance as a geopolitical actor, the EU should paradoxically be less explicit in presenting itself in those terms. This means not only talking about EU interests and promoting these in relations with Global South countries in the name of "mutual interests", but also more accurately defining what "mutual" means and committing to honest evaluation and learning from the extent to which this is realised.

Rather than seeking clarity and learning, in recent years the EU has instead focused on labelling and communicating initiatives without fully thinking through their implementation. The main concepts and objectives behind these initiatives have remained opaque and seem to have been reinterpreted over time, yet it makes it hard to assess whether these ambitious ideas can be realised over time. "Win-win" scenarios do not arise automatically. Iterative approaches are sensible in an unpredictable world, yet an unwillingness to reflect and evaluate is a source of ineffectiveness and frustration. Achieving a "win-win" requires treating partner countries as active co-creators.

Research shows that when local priorities, capacities and institutional contexts are adequately considered, projects achieve greater relevance, sustainability and mutual benefit (Keijzer & Black, 2020; Mawdsley, 2021). Emphasising this point often leads to being branded "nostalgic", but it is not. Rather, programmes that primarily aim at economic cooperation, stabilisation or geopolitical positioning risk remaining limited in effectiveness if structural poverty and fundamental social inequalities persist or worsen. In this sense, promoting human development is not a "nice to have" but a strategic lever for enabling long-term reform processes and growth. China, too, has come to this realisation, as reflected in recent initiatives to put a stronger focus on people-to-people dimensions – including education exchanges, training and health cooperation – as part of broader efforts to build deeper social and political ties with partner countries.

Despite the threats presented by the current geopolitical turmoil, there are opportunities for the EU as well. In a more fragmented global order, coalitions of middle powers that remain committed to multilateral cooperation and the rules-based international order offer Europe an important opportunity. However, the EU will first need to repair its legitimacy by repositioning itself as an active actor with principled stances concerning the defence of the rules-based global order and the critical role of development policy.

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4 The UN at a crossroads: UN80 and the future of multilateralism

Sebastian Haug, Anna Novoselova & Ronny Patz

Since Donald Trump's return to the US presidency, the UN system has come under unprecedented pressure. UN Secretary-General António Guterres and the UN Secretariat were already struggling with a protracted liquidity crisis (caused by recurrent delayed or incomplete payment of assessed contributions from major contributors such as the United States and China), looming reductions in major donors' voluntary contributions and rising geopolitical tensions among UN member states (Camelli & Patz, 2026; Haug, 2024). But the Trump administration's disdain for multilateralism in general, and the UN in particular, poses an even more fundamental and pressing challenge to the UN, both financially and (geo)politically.

Since the establishment of the UN in 1945, the United States has played a key role as the host for the UN headquarters in New York and the largest contributor to UN budgets. Although relations between the UN and the US government have long been complex – with influential anti-UN voices persistently present in US domestic politics (Browne & Nakamura, 2009; Mingst, 2003) – it had never reached a point at which broader US support for the organisation appeared to be under threat. This has changed, as exemplified by the formal or de facto withdrawal of the United States from many parts of the UN system, including withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2025, as well as disengaging from 31 other UN entities in 2026 (The White House, 2026). With the faltering hegemonic position of the United States, a general turn to overt geopolitics (Haug, 2026) and “my-country-first” policies, as well as long-standing criticism about the organisation's inefficiencies, duplication and fragmentation – driven by donors' chronic uncoordinated funding behaviour – the UN's position as the centre of an imperfectly functioning multilateral system is at stake. Other major powers and blocs – from China and the BRICS grouping to the EU and a diverse group of medium-sized states from across the globe – have been unable to put forward a joint response to the fickle and often adversarial posture of the United States. Many have instead exhibited more transactional and self-focused behaviour, such as advocating for UN staff relocations to their own countries. So far, there is no shared vision of what the future of multilateral cooperation through the UN system – including its development, humanitarian and global regulatory agencies – ought to look like.

Against this backdrop, we first outline why recent reform attempts under the so-called UN80 Initiative – triggered primarily by the shift in US policy towards multilateral organisations – have missed several opportunities to strategically reform and strengthen the UN system. We then argue that UN multilateralism is still needed – maybe more than ever before. Finally, we turn to recommendations on what stakeholders should do in order to make the UN fit for purpose in an increasingly challenging global environment.

UN80: an attempt to save the UN system

In March 2025, the UN Secretary-General launched the UN80 Initiative, a reform process spanning various administrative and structural aspects of the UN and aimed at cutting costs and addressing duplication within and across UN entities. Without explicitly mentioning the second Trump administration's concerted attack on multilateralism, UN80 – named after the 80th anniversary of the establishment of the UN in 1945 – was framed as a major step towards repositioning the UN system in an increasingly complex geopolitical and funding environment. Across thematic clusters covering different areas of UN work, from peace and security to development and human rights, UN80 reform efforts were organised around three

“workstreams”: increasing the efficiency of the UN system, tackling the proliferation of UN mandates and engaging in structural reform (Baumann, Novoselova, & Hemmerich, 2025).

Despite UN80’s potential to become a major multilateral reform process, however, member states and the UN bureaucracy have missed key opportunities for meaningful change. By April 2026, most reform elements – initiated in spring 2025 – had not yet been concluded. The UN Secretariat pushed a rushed reform agenda, resulting in an avalanche of bureaucratic reshuffling and attempts at technocratic solutions. This was partly due to the miscalculation that the United States would reinstate its assessed contributions if the UN demonstrated a readiness to reform, and it also reflected the Secretary-General’s concern with shaping his legacy in his final year in office. Although member states welcomed reform efforts in principle, they collectively failed to provide strategic intergovernmental guidance or meaningful input on reform proposals. More importantly, they failed to address fundamental reform needs concerning governance of the UN system and instead responded reactively to the Secretariat’s reform proposals, largely adhering to their standard priorities and established group and/or regional identities.

Although it was intended to respond to one of the most fundamental challenges in the UN’s 80-year history, UN80 has thus failed to inspire bold steps towards reconfiguring UN multilateralism. Both the UN bureaucracy and intergovernmental UN bodies have been unable or unwilling to mobilise the necessary capacity and political will to engage in well-considered reform efforts. Without explicitly acknowledging the seriousness of current challenges in the first place – notably the dearth of financial resources – stakeholders have been unable to decide how best to adapt the scale and/or scope of the UN’s work. The proposals made so far have disregarded the assertion that fragmented funding and intergovernmental decision-making practices are the key drivers of duplication and excessive bureaucratisation across the UN system. Together with the failure of the UN80 reform team to strategically engage member state leaders in discussions about reform, this failure to address root causes, which is the primary responsibility of member states in general and major donors in particular, has contributed to UN80’s limited relevance for the future of UN multilateralism.

Why care about UN multilateralism?

If the United States is turning its back on the UN system, and if both the UN bureaucracy and UN member states have so far been unable to develop a concerted response to major challenges facing the world organisation, is there still a case to be made for trying to reform the UN? Should we let go of the idea that a UN designed for the post–Second World War era still provides an adequate framework for international cooperation through global multilateralism?

Although the UN was set up in 1945 primarily to prevent conflict and foster international peace and security, achieving these goals involved cooperation beyond a narrow security architecture. Over the decades, the UN system has developed into a complex set of entities and forums dedicated to tackling and regulating economic, social, humanitarian, development and human rights concerns. Through intergovernmental fora and a global public administration that delivers operational and policy support from the global to the country level, today’s UN addresses issues as diverse as climate change, global public health and artificial intelligence that go far beyond the UN’s initial purpose.

The accessibility, inclusiveness and representativeness of UN intergovernmental bodies vary considerably: from the General Assembly (where the one-country, one-vote principle gives each member state an equal voice regardless of size or capacity) to the executive boards of UN funds and programmes (where proceedings still reflect donor–recipient dynamics) and the Security Council, which, with its five permanent veto powers, remains the most exclusive governing body within the UN system. Still, its quasi-universal membership – which has grown from 51 member states in 1945 to 193 today – provides the UN with a level of legitimacy that other regional bodies

or ad hoc coalitions lack. Only a few months ago, the 2026 UN budget was adopted by consensus, indicating that even in times of major disruption, 193 states can agree on the baseline of multilateral cooperation.

UN specialised agencies cover a wide range of policy areas, from health (via WHO) and telecommunications (via the International Telecommunications Union) to culture and education (via UNESCO). They provide mechanisms for intergovernmental decision-making, develop global expertise and standards, and support member states in learning from each other. They do all this while accepting that key questions can be answered differently across geographical or (geo)political divides, reflecting the fact that multilateral cooperation is shaped by evolving combinations of collaboration and disagreement. The UN system's development, humanitarian and relief agencies, in turn, have mandates to deliver multilateral assistance in the context of major conflicts, translate the UN's human rights standards into action across the globe and operate as mechanisms for redistributing voluntary contributions provided by those with the capacity to pay – even though the effectiveness and impact of these efforts are often constrained by fragmentation, duplication and bureaucratisation.

The UN system thus provides not only spaces for global dialogue and negotiation but also the institutional backbone for the delivery of joint ambitions. It offers implementing structures that, through international bureaucracies, are trusted partners for most member states. Despite its shortcomings – including overlapping mandates and competition among agencies, gridlock in multilateral negotiations and failure to prevent or end wars – the UN has come a long way and is still uniquely positioned to foster collective action among states at a global level. Strengthening, rather than sidelining, the UN system is essential for managing shared risks and promoting a more stable and cooperative international order.

Post-UN80: making the UN fit for purpose

Despite criticism, most member states have demonstrated a preference for a reformed rather than a ruined UN system. However, for reform to be meaningful, it must address member states' diverging preferences head-on. Only then can it lead to the development of strategies for strengthening the UN system's ability to provide a space for multilateral cooperation that – despite rising geopolitical tensions – is able to address transnational challenges. Although unable to serve as an instrument for fundamentally revising multilateral governance, the UN80 Initiative still provides signals for why and how member states and the UN bureaucracy need to work together in order to achieve systemic change and adapt multilateral cooperation in the context of a disrupted international order. UN80 should therefore be treated as a first stepping stone towards more fundamental reform.

The immediate task for the current UN Secretary-General and his successor (who is set to take up the post in early 2027), the wider UN leadership and member states should be to implement a consensually selected group of priority UN80 proposals over the coming months that deliver on the promise of greater efficiency. Such a targeted implementation focus can both demonstrate the viability of reform and prepare the ground for repositioning the UN system for the budgetary and geopolitical realities post-UN80. Future reform will need to move beyond efficiency measures and – with member states in the driving seat – address the multilateral governance of the UN system in times of disruption, obstruction and shifting power balances. The next Secretary-General and other UN executive leaders should use their convening power to engage member states in honest discussions about the challenges facing the UN system. They should also, when asked, provide modular reform options that leave room for intergovernmental negotiations and package deals.

Negotiations about the future of the UN should include deeper intergovernmental coordination through established groups (e.g. the G77 or regional blocs, to ensure that global majority interests are represented) but also shift to more reform-focused coalitions that can cut across

these groupings to identify shared concerns. Package deals, in which all parties make some (including painful) concessions, could help rebalance the UN's normative and operational functions. Major powers – notably the United States, China, Russia and the EU – should use the upcoming selection process for the next UN Secretary-General to agree on shared reform priorities. Major donors, whose uncoordinated funding practices are at the heart of some of the fundamental structural challenges in the UN system, should review their own behaviour to make sure they contribute to strengthening – rather than further undermining – the increasingly fragile institutional foundation for multilateral cooperation. Smaller and medium-sized member states, in turn, should step up their engagement and embrace the (post-)UN80 process as a unique opportunity to reform UN multilateralism beyond the interests of a few major powers.

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5 China and the future of international cooperation

Sebastian Haug & Hangwei Li

Over the last two decades, the People's Republic of China has been central to significant shifts in the geography of international cooperation. With fundamental shifts in the United States' posture towards international partnerships under the second Trump administration, China's relevance has grown further, albeit on its own terms. In what follows, we discuss how recent international disruptions have affected China, how China-led cooperation has been evolving over the last decade and what more China-centred forms of cooperation mean for the future of bilateral and multilateral partnerships.

How recent international disruptions affect China

Together with Russia's war against Ukraine, recent US-led infringements of other states' sovereignty – including the US abduction of the president of Venezuela and US-Israeli attacks on Iran – challenge some of the fundamental principles of the post-1945 international order. They also create significant challenges for the global economy, severely disrupting supply chains in the global oil market. For China, this is bad news. Iran and Venezuela have been important political and economic partners for Beijing and, in 2025, together provided about 15 per cent of Chinese crude oil imports (Downs, 2026). China also relies on oil and gas from Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates, and it needs helium from Qatar for its microchip industry. Recent developments thus expose some of China's economic vulnerabilities and undermine its diplomatic and economic statecraft. They also contribute to domestic economic challenges – notably deflation and mounting debt accumulated by local governments – and increase pressure on the Chinese government to allocate resources more strategically.

However, current disruptions also create opportunities for China – right in line with the Chinese word for “crisis” [危机], which shares a character with the word for “opportunity” [机会]. While global attention focuses on the United States and Russia as sources of instability, China can position itself as a comparatively stable partner and defender of multilateralism. In a context where the vast majority of UN member states have long endorsed some version of the One China policy, recent US attacks, as well as Russia's war against Ukraine, contribute to increasing the legitimacy of Beijing's plans regarding “reunification” with Taiwan (Haug, 2026). Chinese leaders have also recently emphasised China as a “stable economic force” (Hall & Cash, 2026) amid global uncertainty to enhance China's attractiveness, notably across countries in the Global South. Beijing's diplomatic engagement over Iran reinforces this image-making strategy by allowing China to present itself as a supporter of ceasefire diplomacy and regional stability, even though the effectiveness of these efforts remains uncertain. Although current international disruptions expose China to greater risks, they simultaneously create opportunities for Beijing to expand its influence and reshape (its role in) a global system in flux.

Shifts in China-led cooperation

This combination of challenges and opportunities affects the context in which China seeks to recalibrate its international cooperation efforts, which have expanded significantly over the past two decades. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – launched in 2013 – has been a key vehicle in this endeavour. By 2025, China had reportedly signed BRI-related Memoranda of Understanding with up to 150 countries, with estimates suggesting that BRI engagement to date had mobilised \$71 billion in construction contracts and \$51 billion in investments (Nedopil, 2025). More recently, the BRI has undergone a gradual evolution. Initially characterised by large-scale infrastructure financing, the BRI has shifted towards more targeted, financially sustainable and risk-aware projects (Li & Wang, 2025). There has also been a growing emphasis on “green”

development, digital connectivity and “small and beautiful” projects, partly in response to international criticism concerning debt sustainability and partly as an adjustment to China’s own economic slowdown (Li & Hackenesch, 2024).

A series of China’s “Global Initiatives” – introduced since 2021 – has built on BRI experience and serves as a discursive framework for “softer” diplomatic and cooperation-focused activities, from targeted project financing to capacity-building and people-to-people exchanges. Examples include police training programmes under the Global Security Initiative, governance forums under the Global Civilization Initiative and agricultural cooperation under the Global Development Initiative (GDI). Across thematic areas, these activities present China’s modernisation experience as a potential model for partner countries and a viable alternative to the traditional Western approach to development cooperation. For a number of developing countries in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, especially those that prioritise economic growth over political freedoms, this approach has been particularly appealing (Murphy, 2022).

As the first of China’s Global Initiatives, the GDI has become an institutionalised umbrella for China’s development diplomacy and international development cooperation. Announced in 2021 at the UN, it explicitly links Chinese efforts with the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Chinese diplomats have set up a Group of Friends of the GDI among member states at UN headquarters, while the China International Development Cooperation Agency provides funding and support for GDI projects implemented with international partners across Africa, Asia and Latin America. By strategically linking the GDI to multilaterally agreed frameworks, China has been able to deflect Western criticism, with UN diplomats referring to the shift in emphasis from the BRI to the GDI as a “smart move” (Haug, 2024, p. 1227). At the same time, China has used the SDG agenda selectively, building on elements in line with its interests while ignoring or reinterpreting others (Taggart, Cheng, & Haug, 2026).

Prospects of international cooperation with Chinese characteristics

This combination of pursuing established institutional forms – notably the UN system – and the promotion of alternative China-led schemes has become a key feature of how the Chinese government envisions gradual change in its favour. Instead of forcefully disrupting international institutions, China has been attempting to combine its rhetorical commitment to multilaterally agreed UN frameworks with a dense network of cooperation arrangements comprising traditional bilateral relations; country-to-continent arrangements, such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation; as well as multilateral bodies beyond the UN, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The US retreat from an increasing number of international cooperation arrangements as well as US attacks on key principles of the post-1945 international order are set to expand the space for – and increase the legitimacy of – these venues and schemes that stand at the centre of international cooperation with Chinese characteristics.

China’s longstanding wariness of simply emulating Western-led cooperation relations is conditioning how it plans to capitalise on recent disruptions. Instead of filling gaps created by the US retreat from bilateral and multilateral partnerships, China’s bilateral and cross-regional relations are set to evolve in line with the updated BRI emphasis on “small and beautiful” project interventions – an approach also reflected in how the GDI has been set up. The era of expansive Chinese infrastructure investment appears largely to be over. In terms of multilateral cooperation, China is likely to push for incremental change in line with Chinese interests. The UN, in particular, stands at the centre of China’s vision of a reformed international order, but the type of UN multilateralism that Beijing promotes differs significantly from the status quo (Foot & Haug, 2026). Instead of a rather autonomous multilateral bureaucracy, China prefers tighter intergovernmental control. In substantive terms, it has pushed back against key liberal agendas, promoting the right to development – understood collectively – as foundational for the enjoyment

of other human rights. Although some of these elements overlap with preferences in Washington and Moscow, China's distinct emphasis on "democratising" multilateralism seeks to ensure that the developing country majority at the UN has a greater say, with China itself as *primus inter pares*. China's self-identification as a developing country retains political utility among Southern partners, but it has also become harder to sustain, given its economic weight and imminent transition to high-income status (Klingebiel & Li, 2025). Moreover, major Global South countries such as India may share parts of Beijing's reform agenda but have their own leadership ambitions and may not feel comfortable with a China-led international order (Verma & Li, 2025).

A central concern of China's international cooperation endeavours is therefore to mobilise and consolidate support among partners across the Global South. Rather than mimicking the United States in attempting to gain hegemonic control, Beijing is investing in strengthening global connectivity networks in line with Chinese economic and security interests. As the United States, the United Kingdom and the EU's member states reduce or recalibrate their international cooperation portfolios, China-led cooperation is likely to gain greater visibility among Southern partners. Despite the economic challenges Beijing is facing, the US retreat from, and US-led challenges to, existing cooperation schemes have provided fresh momentum to China-led partnerships.

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6 The OECD Development Assistance Committee in the New World Order: five challenges for the future of global development policy

Stephan Klingebiel & Andy Sumner

A brief history

The year 1961 can be seen as the “Big Bang” of international development policy. First, in that year, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD was established. In the context of the Cold War, the United States pushed for an international system to support developing countries. In 1961, US President John F. Kennedy consolidated existing efforts to assist developing nations into USAID. Last but not least, in the same year, Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) was established in what was then West Germany as a dedicated ministry to support developing regions (Bracho, Carey, Hynes, Klingebiel, & Trzeciak-Duval, 2021).

The DAC has long been both a symbol of, and a “norm entrepreneur” in, development cooperation (Esteves & Klingebiel, 2021; Janus, 2022; Sumner & Klingebiel, 2025). It is often seen as synonymous with the form of development cooperation practised by “traditional donors”, that is, a club of high-income countries. Linked to this has been the criticism that the governance of ODA reflects persistent global power inequalities. At the same time, the DAC has served as the central forum in which key norms and quality standards of development cooperation have been negotiated over more than 60 years. It was within the DAC that the concept of “official development assistance” (ODA) was developed. ODA refers to public resources provided on concessional terms to promote economic and social development in developing countries.

DAC members are also regularly assessed through peer review processes that assess their adherence to agreed standards (Ashoff, 2013). Like the role of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in education policy, these reviews in theory serve both disciplinary and supportive functions. In practice, no DAC member country has wished to be publicly criticised for failing to comply with jointly adopted DAC standards and relevant international agreements.

Last but not least, the DAC members also issue statements of good practice and position papers on the international development agenda. These documents have been influential and have, for instance, influenced the 2000 UN Millennium Declaration and the eight Millennium Development Goals adopted – which in turn evolved into the current 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

DAC membership has expanded considerably since its creation, growing to 33 members today. Several nations once classified as developing countries, such as Spain, South Korea and a number of states that joined the EU in and after 2004, later sought and obtained DAC membership. At the same time, a growing number of OECD members, including Turkey, Mexico and Chile, have decided not to join the DAC. This reflects differing approaches to development cooperation and varying degrees of commitment to ODA-based norms. Countries that do not see themselves as part of a collective commitment around the ODA target of 0.7 per cent – such as Mexico, which historically identified with the Global South and was a founding member of the G77 before joining the OECD in 1994 – have so far remained outside the committee.

Despite these variations, the United States played a decisive role in establishing the DAC as a rule-setting and coordinating body. US influence extended beyond institutional design. For

decades, the United States also dominated personnel decisions and held the DAC chair until a rotating system was introduced (Bracho et al., 2021).

Five challenges for the DAC and the future of global development policy

Today, however, the DAC-influenced system for international development policy faces growing pressure to adapt to a changing global landscape. The development environment is shaped by deep geopolitical disruptions and growing systemic rivalry. Development policy increasingly unfolds in a context of geopolitical competition, conflict and multipolarity. At the same time, cohesion among traditional Western donors has weakened, while actors from the Global South exercise greater agency through strategies of multi-alignment. Cuts to ODA budgets across several major traditional donor countries, tensions within the multilateral system and growing political contestation around the SDGs have further unsettled the development architecture (Klingebiel & Sumner, 2025). One consequence of declining support for ODA in donor countries has been a proliferation of initiatives, commissions and debates seeking to rethink the future of development cooperation since 2025.

These broader systemic changes have placed the OECD and its DAC under increasing pressure. Several structural challenges can be identified.

First, the DAC's central role in development cooperation governance is shrinking. This reflects the growing importance of non-OECD development actors, above all China, which has become an increasingly significant actor in shaping development paradigms, for example through initiatives related to global governance. Operationally, Chinese engagement has been particularly visible in infrastructure investment, alongside expanding cooperation in areas such as trade, knowledge exchange and media.

Second, ODA, on average, has been losing relative importance for some time. Many developing countries have had rising incomes and have diversified their sources of finance. Only about 30 to 40 Global South countries with populations of more than one million remain highly ODA-dependent, defined here as cases where ODA exceeds 3 to 5 per cent of GNI (World Bank, 2026). However, particularly for least developed countries, ODA often remains a major source of state revenue and investment. In contrast, many "post-ODA" Global South countries still pay high market rates on their treasury bond issues (OECD, 2026) and would therefore still benefit from access to concessional lending at rates below market levels.

Furthermore, other forms of financing – including commercial finance and cooperation provided by emerging development actors such as China, India, Turkey, Indonesia and countries of the Arabian Peninsula – have become increasingly important for many countries in the Global South. Recent cuts to ODA budgets by the United States and other major providers such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany reinforce this trend and are likely to reduce ODA volumes further in the near future.

Third, as ODA loses relative weight and DAC members reduce their aid budgets, the DAC is increasingly shifting its attention towards broader financial flows to developing countries. On the one hand, this shift reflects the growing importance of non-ODA flows. On the other hand, it entails risks. Political leadership over many of these broader financial flows does not lie with the DAC but with other actors. Moreover, if ODA, which has long been the central brand of the DAC, loses prominence, the committee's core identity may become less clear.

Fourth, the OECD's own conception of development policy needs to evolve. To date, ODA has remained central to how the OECD conceptualises development cooperation to some considerable degree (Sumner, Klingebiel, & Yusuf, 2025). In practice, though, the OECD already engages in a wider range of development-related activities. Several OECD members provide development cooperation but are not DAC members or do not define their engagement primarily

through ODA, for example Mexico, Turkey, Costa Rica, Chile and Colombia. This variance may become even more visible if future OECD members include countries such as Brazil, Indonesia or Thailand. An OECD that emphasises ODA while giving less recognition to other approaches to development cooperation risks appearing less inclusive. In other policy areas, the OECD has successfully brought together different national approaches, for example in education policy. A similar approach could be applied in development policy. This would not imply abandoning ODA, but rather positioning it alongside other forms of development cooperation pursued by OECD members.

Fifth, the DAC does not currently present itself as the central venue for a global debate on the future of development cooperation. While OECD debates address many relevant issues, they often focus on specific policy questions rather than offering a broader strategic perspective at a time when the foundations of the development cooperation system are being questioned. Current reform discussions within the DAC address important issues but may appear insufficient when viewed in retrospect. Given the limitations of other international development structures, including within the UN system, the OECD, or a group of like-minded OECD member states, could play a stronger role in initiating a more ambitious debate about the future architecture of development cooperation. Although managing the intentionally disruptive role of the United States in international development politics will remain difficult (Klingebiel & Sumner, 2025), the OECD could still serve as a platform to bring countries from Europe (Keijzer & Verschaeve, 2018) as well as Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea together with non-DAC OECD members such as Costa Rica, Mexico and Turkey, in addition to providing a stronger role for partners from the Global South.

So, what now?

The DAC was built for a world that no longer exists. It was designed as a club of Western donors coordinating concessional finance during the Cold War. That world has given way to one of multipolarity, shrinking ODA budgets and rising actors that operate outside DAC norms entirely. The five challenges outlined above are not isolated. They are symptoms of a deeper structural shift in which the political economy of development cooperation is being recast. It seems rather unlikely that the UN will play a more significant role in development cooperation in the future (given US pressure to focus on its “core mandate”, among other factors). As a traditionally strong supporter of development policy – and unlike the OECD without including the United States – the EU could in principle assume a more prominent role. However, since the early 2020s, the EU has adopted a less proactive stance in this regard. Thus, despite structural legitimacy challenges, the DAC and the OECD could emerge as more prominent actors – and potentially as a hub for a more fundamental transformation of development debates. Given their technical expertise, combined with a strong values-based approach that includes democratic governance but extends beyond it, the potential for a more pronounced and inclusive leadership role still exists.

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7 Navigating trade and development cooperation in a fragmenting global order

Clara Brandi, Zoryana Olekseyuk & Frederik Stender

The rules-based trading system has been a central pillar of the post–Cold War international order. Predictable economic relations and lower trade barriers supported an unprecedented expansion of global trade and economic integration. Institutions such as the WTO helped establish a framework of shared principles designed to prevent protectionism and resolve disputes peacefully. This system contributed significantly to economic growth and poverty reduction, particularly in emerging and developing economies (e.g. Baldwin, 2016).

However, the system has also faced mounting difficulties over time, with its gradual erosion becoming increasingly evident in the collapse of the Doha Development Round after 2008 and the paralysis of the WTO Appellate Body from 2019 onwards. More recently, unilateral trade measures, successive waves of US tariffs, rising geopolitical competition and the resurgence of industrial policy have not only undermined the multilateral trading system but also generated substantial disruptions and uncertainties in both trade and investment relations.

Developing countries are among the most affected by these developments, not least because contemporary global trade involves more than just the exchange of final goods. Around 80 per cent of world trade now takes place within global value chains (GVCs) linked to transnational corporations, with production stages fragmented across multiple countries (UNCTAD, 2013). In these chains, developing countries typically occupy upstream positions and specialise in supplying raw materials or labour-intensive inputs, whereas more technologically complex and higher value-added activities are concentrated elsewhere. Especially economies in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as in Africa remain locked into low-complexity, low-margin tasks, whereas foreign-controlled firms dominate higher-value segments (ADB et al., 2025). This structural position renders developing countries particularly vulnerable to substitution and constrains economic diversification and development (e.g. Barrot, Calderón, & Servén, 2018).

Against this background, trade-related development cooperation plays a crucial role. At the multilateral level, it does so by helping to sustain a fair and inclusive rules-based trading system. At the regional and country levels, it does so by strengthening institutions and investing in infrastructure as well as productive and trade capacities. These efforts also enhance developing countries' attractiveness as investment destinations and trading partners within GVCs, helping them integrate more effectively into global markets and supporting a more resilient development pathway in an increasingly fragmented global order.

This contribution begins by examining the implications of a fragmenting global order for trade. It then highlights why development cooperation in the field of trade remains vital before concluding with an exploration of how development cooperation can help build a more equitable and sustainable international trading system.

Implications: trade in a fragmenting global economy

The reconfiguration of the post–Cold War international order has far-reaching implications for global trade. Three developments stand out: the erosion of multilateral trade governance, the growing geopolitical fragmentation of the global economy and rising policy uncertainty.

First, the multilateral trading system – the binding framework for what was once a broadly shared vision of free and inclusive trade among the WTO's 166 members – faces serious challenges. The WTO has long served as the cornerstone of the global trade regime, providing binding rules and a dispute settlement mechanism that helped prevent trade conflicts from escalating (e.g.

Hoekman & Kostecki, 2009). Progress on new rule-making, however, has stalled since the collapse of the Doha Development Round after 2008. Recurring waves of US tariffs that depart from the WTO's key principles of non-discrimination and reciprocity symbolise a shift from "right" to "might" and call the system's authority into question. At the same time, unilateral measures, such as the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) or its deforestation regulation, are raising doubts about WTO compatibility and may provoke unintended negative consequences for developing countries. The paralysis of the WTO dispute settlement system since 2019 has further weakened the credibility of the rules-based trade regime. This multilateral system is especially important for smaller and poorer countries, which rely on an impartial body and on institutional safeguards in which all members stand on an equal footing, shielding them from the risk of being sidelined in great power struggles.

Second, global trade is increasingly shaped by geopolitical competition. Major powers are using trade policy as a strategic tool in broader geopolitical rivalries. Tariffs, export controls and industrial subsidies are increasingly deployed to protect strategic industries or reduce dependence on geopolitical rivals. Concepts such as "friend-shoring" and "de-risking" reflect a shift towards more politically motivated economic relations. These developments risk fragmenting the global economy into competing regional blocs centred on major powers (e.g. Evenett & Baldwin, 2020).

For developing countries, this fragmentation creates particularly pressing challenges. Many smaller economies, with limited domestic markets and demand, depend heavily on access to global markets and may consequently face pressure to align with one of several competing economic spheres of influence. Such pressures can reduce policy autonomy, divert resources away from more efficient adjustment processes elsewhere, undermine diversification and complicate development strategies based on export-led growth.

Third, the global trading system has become more unpredictable. An increasing number of military conflicts that disrupt supply chains – together with rapid changes in tariffs, subsidies and regulatory policies – creates uncertainty for firms and governments alike. Businesses face a more volatile policy environment, while developing countries often lack the institutional capacity to navigate increasingly complex trade rules, regulatory standards and external shocks.

Despite these challenges, international trade remains a central driver of economic development. GVCs continue to structure production across countries, representing an important channel for technology transfer, productivity growth and job creation (ADB et al., 2025). However, recent empirical evidence also shows that economic linkages between geopolitically distant blocs have significantly declined, although some optimism comes from "connector" countries that bridge these blocs and have so far prevented full-scale decoupling (Gopinath, Gourinchas, Presbitero, & Topalova, 2025). Similarly, although geopolitical distance between trading partners – measured as the "ideal point distance" based on UN General Assembly voting – may not matter under normal conditions, increased trade policy uncertainty can divide the field into friends and rivals (Jakubik & Ruta, 2023). Taken together, these findings suggest that – although international economic linkages among aligned countries appear more resilient than often assumed – geopolitical tensions and policy uncertainty may still foster fragmentation. In this context, the continued importance of international cooperation in trade policy remains evident.

Relevance: why development cooperation in trade still matters

Trade-related development cooperation is both economically and politically important. One key reason is that trade remains one of the most powerful engines of development. However, many developing countries face structural barriers that limit their ability to participate effectively in international trade, integrate and upgrade within GVCs, and foster export diversification across products and markets. These barriers mainly include inadequate infrastructure and limited institutional capacity (UNCTAD, 2025).

International development cooperation helps to address these constraints through a range of instruments. Aid for Trade initiatives support trade-related infrastructure, institutional reforms and export capacities – with evidence suggesting that every dollar invested can generate up to \$20 in exports for least developed countries (OECD & WTO, 2019). Technical assistance and capacity-building – provided through various partners including the WTO, ITC, UNCTAD and GIZ – further support developing countries in areas such as trade facilitation, regulatory reform and investment facilitation. Unilateral trade preference schemes, rooted in the WTO’s Special and Differentiated Treatment provisions for developing countries, such as the Generalised System of Preferences, complement these initiatives by providing preferential market access, thereby enabling countries to capitalise on the gains from trade-related development improvements.

In addition to these economic impacts, development assistance can also serve as a strategic instrument for fostering alliances that promote broader sustainability objectives in trade policy, including climate action and environmental protection (e.g. Brandi, Morin, & Stender, 2022).

Contribution: how development cooperation can shape a more equitable trade order

Beyond addressing overarching development challenges, trade-related development cooperation can actively contribute to shaping a more inclusive and sustainable global economic order. Four areas are particularly important: supporting inclusive trade agreements, promoting regional cooperation, strengthening multilateral trade governance and aligning trade policy with broader sustainability objectives.

First, development cooperation can support the negotiation and implementation of trade and investment agreements that take development concerns seriously. Many developing countries lack the technical expertise required to negotiate complex trade agreements and implement their provisions effectively, while also addressing structural barriers such as inadequate infrastructure. Development cooperation can provide technical assistance for trade negotiations, regulatory reforms and customs modernisation.

Second, when the multilateral system offers uncertain benefits, international development cooperation can play a crucial role in supporting regional integration. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), for example, aims to create a single market across the African continent. If implemented successfully, it could significantly expand intra-African trade, support industrialisation and strengthen regional value chains. The prospect of continent-wide free trade could also attract foreign direct investment and generate positive spillovers such as increased employment opportunities. Development cooperation plays a key role in helping countries implement the agreement and build the institutions required for its effective functioning.

Third, international cooperation can help sustain and reform multilateral trade governance. Despite its current challenges, the WTO remains the only global institution responsible for establishing and enforcing common trade rules. Strengthening the organisation is therefore essential for maintaining predictable and cooperative international economic relations. One promising avenue is the development of flexible multilateral approaches, including plurilateral agreements among groups of willing countries. These agreements can advance cooperation even when consensus among all WTO members is difficult to achieve, thereby generating a new dynamic within the WTO. One recent plurilateral example is the Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) initiative, which has been signed by more than two-thirds of WTO members. The agreement is intended to make investment procedures more transparent and efficient, and it could bring particular benefits to low- and middle-income countries. Development cooperation can help ensure that developing countries have the capacity to participate effectively in such initiatives.

Fourth, trade policy must be aligned more closely with broader sustainability objectives. Climate change and environmental degradation have become central concerns in international economic governance. Development cooperation can help low- and middle-income countries adapt to new sustainability requirements, participate in emerging green value chains and benefit from expanding markets for environmentally friendly goods and services. Support for sustainable trade can include capacity-building on environmental and labour standards, assistance for the development of green export sectors and support for policies that facilitate the transition towards low-carbon production systems. In this way, trade can contribute not only to economic growth but also to the broader goals of sustainable development.

Conclusion

International trade stands at a crossroads. Unilateral trade measures, export controls, industrial subsidies and import tariffs – most prominently the successive waves of US tariffs – signal a broader shift away from rules-based cooperation towards power-based trade politics, threatening to sideline multilateral, inclusive and sustainability-oriented approaches.

In this context, trade-related development cooperation plays an important countervailing role. By supporting mutually beneficial trade agreements, strengthening multilateral institutions and promoting sustainable trade practices, it can help shape a global trading system in which developing countries can engage on a more equal footing. Development-oriented trade cooperation thus offers a pathway to preserving the benefits of economic openness while ensuring that international trade contributes to inclusive and sustainable development.

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8 Emerging cooperation strategies in development finance amid a shifting global order

Kathrin Berensmann

Implications of the changing global order for development finance

In the context of the changing global order and rising nationalism, several countries, including the United States and some European countries, have cut their official development assistance (ODA). The OECD forecasts a decline of ODA by around 23 per cent between 2024 and 2025 (OECD, 2026). At the same time there is a significant financing gap for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), currently estimated at about \$4 trillion. Furthermore, the annual financing required to achieve the SDGs by 2030 increased by 36 per cent between 2015 and 2022, rising from \$6.81 trillion to \$9.24 trillion. This increase was driven by climate-related challenges, the impact of the pandemic, supply chain disruptions, and rising food and energy prices. These two trends have led to a significant SDG financing gap, which is projected to reach \$6.4 trillion by 2030, assuming that it continues to grow at the rate observed between 2015 and 2022. Furthermore, mounting debt obligations are exerting pressure on pivotal investments in health, education and climate resilience (OECD, 2025). According to the debt sustainability analysis of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, about half of low-income countries are either at high risk of debt distress or already in debt distress.

Two main factors have further driven these trends. First, the changing global order has reduced levels of multilateral cooperation, in which countries pool resources to finance development programmes and projects. Rising scepticism towards multilateralism in some countries is weakening support for international financial institutions (IFIs). Some governments are shifting funds from multilateral banks to national initiatives, strategic alliances or bilateral deals. However, IFIs remain key actors in development finance.

Second, the changing global order has altered the pattern of cooperation. With regard to cooperation in the field of development finance, it is striking that some of the most important lenders, including the United States and China, are shifting their patterns of cooperation away from multilateral institutions towards plurilateral, bilateral and national structures. There are new bilateral lenders such as China, India and Saudi Arabia as well as new multilateral lenders, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the BRICS Bank. The shift from a Western-led multilateral system towards new lenders and institutions has introduced different rules and standards, as governance reforms as well as environmental and social safeguards are often less important for these lenders. In the field of development finance, this means that cooperation between lenders with similar objectives and rules has been increasing, making the development finance landscape increasingly complex, fragmented and uncertain (Klingebiel & Sumner, 2025). Initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, led by China, and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, backed by G7 countries, demonstrate this growing competition. Geopolitical tensions are transforming development finance into a strategic instrument of influence. Financing decisions are increasingly shaped by political considerations rather than by the expected development impact, and pressure may be applied on recipient countries to align with geopolitical agendas in order to access funding.

Although ODA remains crucial, it is insufficient on its own to achieve the SDGs. As a result, development finance beyond ODA has become increasingly important, leading to greater interest in mobilising private-sector investment and expanding public-private cooperation.

Reasons to maintain international cooperation in development finance

Development finance has relied on multilateral cooperation, whereby many countries pool their resources to fund development programmes and projects. However, one consequence of the changing global order has been a decline in cooperation, even though it remains crucial for development finance, as many development challenges are too large, complex and transnational to be tackled by a single country or institution. Such cooperation allows countries and institutions to do four things: (1) address global development challenges: Coordinated financing helps countries tackle global challenges such as climate change, pandemics and migration as well as to achieve the SDGs; in this regard, the provision of global public goods is essential; (2) combine their resources: This makes it possible to finance large-scale projects that a single actor could not. Cooperation also allows countries to pool knowledge to address these issues through IFIs, including multilateral development banks (MDBs) and the IMF; (3) distribute risks: Many developing countries are perceived as high-risk for investors. Cooperative development finance mechanisms can share risk among multiple partners, provide guarantees or blended finance, and thereby mobilise private financial resources; (4) increase the effectiveness of aid: Countries can coordinate their policies more effectively – thereby avoiding the duplication of projects – align their priorities more closely with those of recipient countries, and share governance of projects and programmes.

Development finance cooperation in a shifting global order

The international financial system is shifting from a traditional multipolar structure to a more plurilateral and bipolar order, with the United States and China emerging as the dominant powers. In this evolving landscape, states and regions must reassess their positions, forge alliances, and navigate global institutions and other forms of cooperation. By promoting alternative models of collaboration and reforming existing frameworks, cooperation in development finance can help create a more equitable and sustainable global order while making better use of the benefits of cooperation.

Promote public–private partnerships

As development finance beyond ODA has grown in importance, mobilising private-sector investment and strengthening public–private cooperation has become pivotal, including closer collaboration between governments, IFIs and the private sector. Achieving the SDGs is dependent on effectively using public–private partnerships (PPPs) as a means of mobilising private-sector resources, capital and expertise.

Coalition of “middle power” countries, IFIs and the private sector: Protection against natural disasters

This creates an opportunity for “middle power” countries to form a coalition of the willing and cooperate with IFIs and the private sector, for instance to improve protection against natural disasters caused by climate change. One example is Japan’s Disaster Risk Reduction × Technology Public–Private Partnership Platform, a government-led initiative established by the Cabinet Office in 2021 that connects local governments with private companies offering disaster risk reduction technologies. In this context, the Think 7 (T7) group recommends that the G7 work closely with other international actors. This could include cooperation with organisations such as the UN, the OECD, the World Bank and European technical working groups that convene certain European schemes, such as Swiss KGV and Flood Re (T7, 2026a). However, if only some G7 countries are willing to cooperate in this field, a smaller group could still move forward and initiate such collaboration.

Cooperation between IFIs and the private sector: Private Sector Investment Lab

To mobilise private investment, it is essential to enhance cooperation between IFIs and the private sector. One example is the Private Sector Investment Lab (PSIL), launched by the World Bank Group in 2023, which is a policy-and-innovation platform designed to explore practical ways to increase private investment in emerging markets and developing economies. The World Bank Group has a central role to play in this effort by using its resources, convening power and knowledge to catalyse private capital more effectively. The purpose of the Lab is to bring together leaders from major global corporations and financial institutions to identify the barriers that limit the flow of private capital into developing countries and to develop solutions to address these challenges (World Bank, 2026). To date, no evaluation of the Lab has been carried out. One limitation of the PSIL is that it consists exclusively of business leaders. The World Bank's management should consider revising its membership structure to better reflect the public sector, as mobilising private investment necessitates aligning public and private interests (Zattler & Schmiege, 2025). One potential option would be to include interested countries, including "middle power" countries, in the PSIL.

Involvement of private actors for health care services: Universal Health Coverage

PPPs in Africa's health sector mark a major shift in development policy. Whereas development efforts previously focused on delivering comprehensive health care through publicly financed systems, the emphasis has now shifted towards achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC). Central to the UHC agenda is the strategic involvement of private actors as both providers and financiers of health care services. As the leading international development organisation advocating this approach, the WBG encourages African countries to adopt PPP frameworks for their health systems through a combination of policy guidance and lending instruments. Health PPPs introduce private finance, market instruments and profit-driven practices into national health care systems. However, this "financialisation" risks undermining equitable access by prioritising financial returns over the right to universal health care (Chukwuma, Romero, & Van Waeyenberge, 2025).

Cooperation among public development banks: Public Development Bank Guarantee Hub

Public development banks (PDBs) – including coalitions of MDBs and national development banks – are increasingly working together through alliances such as the "Finance in Common" system in pursuit of a more collective approach. Through such coordination, they can pool their strengths – including areas of expertise, financial capacities and local knowledge – to better support country-led development. However, differences in standards, processes and financing instruments, including de-risking instruments, continue to create inefficiencies, raise costs, delay projects and constrain large-scale investment (Mariotti, Kozul-Wright, Bhandary, & Gallagher, 2025; T7, 2026b).

At COP30, Financial Institutions for Climate Sustainability, the International Development Finance Club and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency launched the Public Development Bank (PDB) Guarantee Hub in partnership with the Nationally Determined Contributions Partnership. The hub aims to mobilise private investment in climate projects by providing guarantees and reducing risk, thereby helping developing countries meet their climate targets and accelerate sustainable development. The PDB Guarantee Hub offers several key advantages: (1) it reduces the risk of private investment by offering guarantees, thus encouraging more capital for climate projects; (2) it mobilises additional finance by leveraging public guarantees to attract private-sector funds; (3) it supports climate goals by helping developing countries implement projects aligned with their Nationally Determined Contributions; (4) it enhances coordination between development banks, governments and private investors; and (5) it accelerates project implementation by simplifying access to guarantees for renewable energy, adaptation and other sustainable initiatives (NDC Partnership, 2025). Although this appears to be a promising initiative for cooperation in development finance, it is still too new for

its implementation to be assessed. A T7 paper recommends that the G7 build on this initiative and scale up its potential (T7, 2026b). However, if the interests of all G7 countries are not aligned, a coalition of “middle power” countries could still promote this initiative collectively.

In sum, the global financial system is shifting towards a more plurilateral and bipolar structure dominated by the United States and China. In this context, “middle power” countries must reassess their roles, form strategic alliances and engage with international institutions. Expanding public–private cooperation and mobilising private-sector investment through development finance beyond ODA are becoming increasingly important. The effective use of PPPs can leverage private resources, capital and expertise to advance the SDGs and promote a fairer, more sustainable global order.

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9 Global climate and environmental governance in a shifting global order

Steffen Bauer

At the beginning of this decade, it briefly appeared that there might be space for enlightened optimism: As world leaders and international organisations grappled with the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, momentum had been gathering to “build back better” while also addressing the global ecological crisis (Bauer, 2021). However, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine heralded a different turn of events and accelerated an already burgeoning renaissance of geopolitics. Combined with a surge in post-truth right-wing populism and corresponding shifts in national agendas across major democracies, these developments do not bode well for sustainable development, let alone a deep transformation towards global sustainability and planetary justice. Now what?

This contribution seeks to address three overarching questions: What are the most important implications of the geopolitical turn for global climate and environmental governance? Why is international cooperation (still) relevant in this context? How can international cooperation bring its assumed relevance to bear and contribute to a more sustainable global order?

Implications for global environmental governance

The observed shifts in the global order are being driven by at least three interacting trends that are fundamentally geopolitical: power shifts among major states (notably the United States and China, but also others), shifting arenas of inter-state competition and conflict (notably around innovative technologies, including AI, and corresponding resource needs), pushback against economic globalisation (notably affecting international trade relations). These trends not only disrupt the rules-based liberal international order that characterised world politics over the past decades but are also intertwined with a rapidly worsening triple ecological crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. Through complex interdependencies, these trends are themselves shaped by climate and environmental change (e.g. the rush to pursue previously inaccessible resources in a thawing Arctic) while also exacerbating it (e.g. the securitisation of domestic agendas and the ecological footprint of military conflicts). In essence, environmental change affects geopolitical dynamics while geopolitics reshapes the framework conditions of environmental politics (Sun et al., 2026).

At present, four issues stand out as particularly illustrative of the geopolitical dimension of environmental policy and governance (Sun et al., 2026): the global race for critical minerals, the quest for valuable land resources, the trade–environment nexus, and the obstruction of environmental policy agendas and its scientific underpinnings.

Dominance over critical raw materials promises not only economic opportunities and competitiveness but also political leverage by creating or sustaining dependencies along vital supply chains. Ironically, that geopolitical competition is driven not least by the salience of clean technologies, which are typically dependent on critical minerals such as lithium, nickel and rare earths.

The quest for land (and also water) resources that are either agriculturally productive or of interest to extractive industries correlates strongly with the observed resurgence of territorial conflict and military conquest, which in turn drive the destruction of ecosystems, including through deforestation, land degradation and pollution.

The geoeconomic dimension of current geopolitics is particularly pronounced at the trade–environment nexus as states compete for the economic benefits of decarbonisation or market-

based environmental policies more generally, as well as for access to markets for clean technologies and critical supply chains. Unilateral trade measures such as the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) are particularly controversial in this context (see also the contribution by Brandi, Olekseyuk and Stender on trade policy in this discussion paper).

Finally, the ideological contestation of decarbonisation and political polarisation around the quest for a "green" transformation has fostered a level of backlash that has been aptly qualified as obstructionism (Roberts, Milani, Jacquet, & Downie, 2025). It strongly correlates with the rise of populist post-truth authoritarianism in major democracies that is often backed by fossil asset owners. These actors invest in discrediting the scientific foundations of climate and environmental policies and leverage their political and economic clout to manipulate and curb environmental policies as well as the institutions that challenge the status quo (Green, 2026). Authoritarian governments and the broader geopolitical turn in world politics evidently serve their cause.

Relevance of international cooperation

The rules-based international order comprises – typically within the UN system – virtually all multilateral institutions that guide international cooperation on environmental challenges as well as international environmental law. As the geopolitical turn in world politics appears to undermine these arrangements, the question about the continued relevance of international cooperation is by no means trivial. Yet climate change and mass extinction remain hard facts and have profound implications for human development. The same holds true for the pollution of marine and terrestrial ecosystems and, hence, the degradation of the invaluable services they provide. The scientific evidence is indisputable (IPBES, 2024). None of these geo-biophysical realities will disappear, regardless of whether a new global order emerges in the near term.

Moreover, the resulting challenges are referred to as "global challenges" for a simple reason: They can only be addressed effectively at the global scale. That is to say, not even the most powerful states can address them single-handedly. They may be well-positioned to cope with the symptoms in the short and medium term, yet they are unable to cure the root causes – even if they were to bring like-minded allies into designated minilateral "clubs". If global environmental challenges are to be dealt with effectively, international cooperation remains essential and, hence, relevant. The question, then, is what international cooperation will, or should, look like in a shifting global order?

In considering that question, it is important to acknowledge that the existing liberal international order has not delivered effective international cooperation – if effectiveness is measured by the extent to which it averts and minimises global ecological problems. As a case in point, the United States never joined the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) or the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and it was a consistent obstacle to more ambitious global climate action long before its current president entered politics.

Accordingly, if international cooperation around environmental challenges – not least climate change – is to yield meaningful success, it will in any case need to change. Indeed, independent of US involvement, it has long been acknowledged that UN climate change conferences need to shift gears in order to deliver on essential governance functions (Obergassel et al., 2022). Hence, the current disruption entails the possibility that international cooperation on climate change and other environmental challenges will not become obsolete, but rather that it may force a reframing of how to overcome political and institutional challenges. Accordingly, international cooperation would merely be "difficult in a different way" (Hoffmann, 2026), but possibly with an increased sense of urgency to maintain what has worked – there are considerable successes to build on – and to develop new approaches that are able to make a meaningful difference.

Potential contribution of international cooperation

What might this look like? How might international cooperation contribute to a more sustainable and more equitable global order in spite of the current geopolitical tide?

Current dynamics challenge not only the international order but also many of the theories, concepts and premises that are typically applied to explain it. Yet, decades of scholarship on international environmental cooperation has accumulated a rich body of knowledge and understanding that should prove fairly robust, even amid geopolitical turbulence.

Conflicts of interest are abundant in international relations, not least with regard to transboundary environmental challenges, and international cooperation is a straightforward means of addressing such conflicts in a constructive manner. Cooperation thrives on trust, which is typically fostered and sustained in institutions that are perceived as legitimate by the cooperating partners. Institutional legitimacy, in turn, depends on credible commitments to and compliance with institutional objectives. If these basic conditions are in place, institutional legitimacy will ideally be further enhanced by addressing structural inequalities between partners and delivering effective outcomes relative to an institution's stated objectives.

Where this is not the case, trust and legitimacy suffer. The UN climate conferences of recent years are a case in point and have strained the legitimacy of multilateral climate institutions. Arguably, this is due less to the repeated policy reversals of successive US administrations or the recent rise in military conflicts than to other key actors' failure to fulfil essential commitments and the persistent misconception that efficiency and equity are mutually exclusive.

Yet there is no inevitable path towards a downward spiral. The vast majority of states that favour a rules-based international order over transactional geopolitics – notably the EU and other “middle powers”, as highlighted by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney – still have it within their power to (re)build trust through international cooperation and to renew the legitimacy of international institutions. As confidence in a universal approach to global environmental challenges fades, so too does the imperative to draw all actors into weak consensus-based decisions (Hoffmann, 2026).

Instead, a broad-based revival of the former “High-Ambition Coalition”, which helped secure the Paris Agreement in 2015, could accelerate and deepen international cooperation. It may even increase the cost of inaction and non-cooperation for free riders and bystanders, at least over time. The recent impetus at COP30 in Brazil to foster international cooperation around a “transitioning away from fossil fuels” approach, including beyond the formal COP process itself, provides a useful test case.

Moving forward with such initiatives and building corresponding coalitions will require an appreciation that the legitimacy of pertinent international institutions – such as the CBD and the Paris Agreement – is contingent on perceptions of equity and justice (Klinsky et al., 2017). In essence, inequality undermines sustainability at both the international and domestic levels (Chancel, 2020). Hence, to revive and improve the international institutions that frame and guide international cooperation on existential ecological threats and corresponding interdependencies, middle powers such as the EU would be well advised to address credibly the equity concerns of middle- and lower-income countries, not least with regard to the mobilisation and governance of international climate finance. Moreover, they should acknowledge that China, in particular, is successfully positioning itself as an attractive partner for many of these countries (Panwar, Wilkinson, Solanki, & Hurley, 2026). Still, many, if not most, middle- and lower-income countries are willing and, indeed, capable of sustaining a rules-based order. Such an order may co-exist as a resilient counterweight to the transactional playing field of authoritarian oligarchs and their libertarian cronies, provided it is built on credible commitments to international cooperation and equitable institutions.

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10 Agricultural development and food and nutrition security in any emerging global order

Michael Brüntrup & Aiveen Donnelly

Food and nutrition security (FNS) is under increasing strain. In both absolute and relative terms, major progress was made until the early 2010s, driven mainly by substantial improvements in China. After that period – paradoxically during the era of the Sustainable Development Goals – progress slowed, and during the COVID-19 crisis the indicators worsened across almost all dimensions and regions (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2025). Climate-induced supply shocks, high food inflation, economic slowdown, and an increasing number and intensity of conflicts are the main drivers of this development. Depending on the specific context, one or more of the three fundamental pillars of FNS – food availability, access and utilisation – are under pressure, while the fourth pillar, stability, which underpins the other three, is also increasingly at risk.

New uncertainties in the global order are affecting this dire situation in several ways: Global food markets are subject to increasing risks from geopoliticisation, as seen since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and more recently when Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz. Risks to FNS arise not only from political interference and armed conflict directly affecting food trade, but also indirectly from disruptions to the production and trade of fertilisers and pesticides, financial flows, logistics and major firms, among other reasons (Hebebrand, Glauber, Vos, & Rice, 2026). Such threats are likely to increase under a scenario of heightened geopolitical rivalry, in which superpowers act without considering the side effects on global food markets and regional political security, or when they do so explicitly to harm rivals. Moreover, smaller states may follow suit within their respective regions, creating further risks and instability.

All of these threats exacerbate or modify other challenges to the stability of food systems: stress on supply induced by the effects of climate change, land degradation and loss of agrobiodiversity, strain resulting from higher demand due to population growth, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), as well as rising demand for higher-quality food in many countries of the Global South (Van Dijk, Morley, Rau, & Saghai, 2021). At the same time, food insecurity undermines political stability and may generate additional geopolitical pressure as people and groups within and across countries compete over limited resources. The growing concentration of food insecurity in urban areas has become more politically sensitive for maintaining political stability than the previously predominant concentration of hunger in rural areas (Newman, 2020).

Countries will have to react to these additional geopolitical threats to their FNS in various ways, depending on their specific endowments, capacities and positions within the geopolitical landscape. Two options are to diversify trade, especially food imports, or to increase domestic food production.

As for diversifying food trade, under geopoliticised markets, as described above, this is challenging due to the many ways in which geopolitics can exert pressure on sources, trade routes and delivery times. Countries need to balance the efficiency gains of free trade with the risks involved in relying on international imports to meet their food demand. Food self-sufficiency strategies will therefore gain importance over trade-oriented ones, as can already be observed in other countries in relation to other strategic goods such as energy, oil, microchips and weapons (WEF, 2026).

As to fostering agricultural production, three pathways can be distinguished:

- Where land – the only truly fixed factor of production – is not yet scarce, as in several sub-Saharan African countries and a few others, there is scope to expand the land under cultivation. Such an expansion in land (and water) use extension can also be facilitated by reducing environmental regulations, which are seen as constraining production. In poor countries, this usually means environmental set-aside areas, while in middle-income countries intensification-limiting rules may also be at stake (Ajayi & Matakala, 2006; Mangnus & Candel, 2025). This would happen at the expense of protected areas, fallow, natural vegetation (forests) and wetlands. This may occur through the expansion of local farms, but such countries are also prone to large-scale land-based investments by local and international investors. Foreign investments are likely to increase further, particularly by investors from countries that have limited land resources, such as the Persian Gulf countries (Keulertz, 2025).
- Countries with low levels of input use such as fertilisers, pesticides or irrigation (if water is available) can seek to increase these inputs. This applies to almost all countries in SSA, regardless of whether land is scarce or abundant. In such contexts, existing smallholders and medium-sized farms provide the basis for further development.
- Productivity growth can also be achieved through greater sophistication and efficiency in the use of production factors, measured through Total Factor Productivity (TFP). This route calls for greater use of advanced biological and abiotic technologies, ranging from improved seeds and more efficient fertilisation to biological production know-how and the use of drones and digital technologies. All production systems and farm sizes can benefit from such TFP growth, but smallholders are often disadvantaged due to less formal knowledge, a lack of access to capital and the limited economies of scale of some technologies.

There are, however, absolute, strategic and economic limits to such self-sufficiency strategies. Increases in domestic production capacity can enhance resilience against external shocks, such as the geopolitisation of international markets, but they can also increase vulnerability to local and domestic shocks. In addition, some countries have limited options for further domestic expansion because of exhausted natural resources, input use is already high and productivity levels are already advanced. These countries are the ones most likely to invest in other countries' agricultural production (Keulertz, 2025). Finally, expanding domestic production often entails costs, whether in the form of investment in knowledge production and extension services, infrastructure, higher food prices (particularly when production-promoting policies are accompanied by protective measures), or losses resulting from reduced specialisation and diminished benefits from trade (Clapp, 2017).

In this context of geopoliticised food markets, it is also important to mention low- and middle-income countries that have benefitted from open food trade in the past by exporting food (OECD, 2025). In a more geopoliticised world, they may be harmed either by direct political interventions in trade or by efforts among vulnerable countries to increase food self-sufficiency. In some cases, however, they may also benefit from diversification efforts, while others may emerge as net food exporters.

The increasing relevance of FNS for international cooperation

International development cooperation makes important contributions to FNS. In times of geopolitical crisis, FNS has become a central concern for international cooperation for several reasons:

- **Peace and security:** Food security is a fundamental driver of peace and security. If it is threatened at the local and national levels, spillovers can affect providers of international

development cooperation (donors) in several ways. Food insecurity can trigger domestic policy crises, particularly when urban populations are affected. In addition, local conflicts resulting from resource scarcity – including those involving land and water grabbing or rising inequality – can destabilise rural communities and fuel banditry and terrorism. Weak and fragile states are less likely to be stable economic partners for donor countries, which is a strong reason for them to support stability and prosperity.

- Local political stresses create regional ripple effects in neighbouring countries, as illustrated by countries in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. The closer crisis regions are to donor countries or to areas of geopolitical importance, such as transport routes or critical mineral deposits, the greater the interest donor countries are likely to have in supporting peace.
- Food crises can accelerate migration, either directly through the flight from hunger or due to politically destabilised situations. Food-related migration may follow a stepwise pattern, from rural to urban movement and then to international migration, but it can also happen suddenly, as when Syrian refugees left their camps when food aid dwindled (Paul, 2018).
- Donor countries may also support poorer countries' FNS-related efforts to strengthen partnerships and build support for cooperation in other policy areas.
- Agricultural expansion and intensification can easily come into conflict with environmental global public goods and goals, such as placing 30 per cent of a country's land under protection, as stipulated in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity; achieving Land Degradation Neutrality under the Convention to Combat Desertification; or reducing greenhouse gas emissions from land use, land-use change and forestry under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (Aleksandrova et al., 2024). Supporting poorer countries in identifying environmentally sustainable ways of expanding production (notably through TFP) is arguably the best way to mitigate the environmental effects of production-enhancing strategies.
- Humanitarian concerns remain a major source of public support for international development cooperation in donor countries, and a development policy that does not place FNS at its centre risks undermining its own justification.

The contribution of international development cooperation to shaping more equitable and sustainable global FNS

In principle, international development cooperation already supports FNS in many ways across all pillars. Amid increasing geopolitical tensions, some aspects deserve additional emphasis:

- **Defending global rules-based trade regimes** merits greater efforts, and these global regimes also benefit most donor countries.
- **Supporting regional and plurilateral rules-based trade and investment regimes.** Examples include EU free trade agreements with low- and middle-income countries and other regional groupings such as the African Continental Free Trade Area. Although such plurilateral systems will likely suffer due to geopolitical rivalries dividing markets and countries into competing blocs, however, such regimes may also increasingly be used to create political alliances. Thus, for weaker countries, some political concessions can be expected, and they should be granted by donor countries.
- **Supporting decision-making to strengthen the resilience of FNS.** FNS strategies will be rebalanced in many places. This will be based on complex considerations regarding external and internal risks and uncertainties as well as mitigation options. Such decisions require reliable information, may create new risks and can be costly to implement. Many countries and private-sector actors may therefore need support for such decisions.

- An important part of most rebalancing considerations will be to **enhance local and regional agricultural value chains and markets** through infrastructure and partnerships. Here, private-sector actors from donor countries can also make valuable contributions in cases where interests align.
- **Promoting knowledge exchange and technology transfer.** In this area, many existing strategies can be enhanced, notably those that improve TFP: land tenure, peaceful and responsible structural change in land use, integrated water resource management with a focus on expanding irrigation, sustainable intensification, appropriate mechanisation, agricultural finance and support for farmer organisations. A potentially interesting example of enhancing resilient and environmentally friendly intensification is the production and use of nitrogen fertilisers by means of electrolytic hydrogen, which is more environmentally friendly than fossil fuel-based fertiliser and can often be produced near agricultural production areas.

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11 Migration in the new global order: an opportunity to facilitate, instead of a problem to be securitised

Charles Martin-Shields, Jana Kuhnt, Susan S. Ekoh & Rose Jaji

Migration, displacement and asylum: Public debate around migration and refugee policy has become increasingly polarised worldwide. A political discourse steeped in mis- and disinformation, political agendas that devalue cooperation and prioritise national interests, and a resurgence of racism and xenophobia have made the pursuit of practical, humane solutions to the legitimate migration and asylum policy challenges governments face nearly impossible (Jaji, 2024). Compounding these political factors are the financial impacts of the US withdrawal from the global cooperation system. Funding shortfalls mean, for example, that food aid and medicines are not being delivered, acutely affecting refugees in Sudan and Kenya, and leaving countries such as Colombia without the money to implement special protection policies for Venezuelan displaced people (López & Kuhnt, 2026). Although national actors can find ways to bridge the gap between stated goals and available funds, for multilateral actors, the reality is that the money is simply not available to meet the aggregate need for coordinated aid delivery in complex regional displacement crises (Ikanda & Owiso, 2026). If high-income countries no longer honour foundational agreements such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, why should countries such as Kenya and Turkey, both of which bear a very high refugee-hosting burden, honour their commitments to implement the international agreements?

For development cooperation, winning the political argument for migration policies that focus on facilitation is crucial. For too long, the EU and other donors have pushed policies that run contrary to the freedom of movement agreements in Africa and Latin America (Dick & Schraven, 2019). This was driven by the fear that people would use these agreements as a stepping stone for onward movement towards the EU. Yet the evidence indicates that these agreements facilitate far more mobility, economic activity and political stability within the regions that implement them. Contrary to the egocentrism of EU migration politics, the vast majority of people who move within Africa intend to stay in Africa. Because the EU makes itself and its political pathologies the centre of the story, migration and refugee policy remains incoherent, trapped in an empirically weak narrative of “permanent emergency”. Instead of producing narratives of “emergency”, policies should focus on creative solutions to the challenges of safely and sustainably facilitating human mobility.

Despite this bleak outlook, and contrary to general public perceptions, there are real opportunities for migration and asylum systems to become spaces of economic and social innovation in a rapidly changing world. Why, then, is international cooperation critical to achieving these less visible possibilities in such a politically charged space? In large part, it is because international cooperation represents a kind of political moral imagination: It is the part of government specifically tasked with *transcending* national interests and engaging moral responsibilities. This is critical because migration transcends borders, and we need a policy field with the technical and moral authority to stake out a clear position that migration in all its forms is not only normal, but historically central to healthy economic, political and social life (IOM, 2026). In the current interregnum, in which funding and coordination capacity for responding to conflict- and climate-disaster-driven displacement are likely to remain limited, the tools and principles of international cooperation will be necessary for setting the conditions for greater, safer and more orderly human mobility.

Implications: international cooperation and the need to think beyond borders

As the new alliances of middle powers discussed by Mark Carney (2026) at Davos emerge, a rigorous evaluation of existing agreements – and of the categories of migrant, refugee and

displaced person that arose after the Second World War – is necessary. Contemporary international agreements such as the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees are built on the foundations of ageing global agreements. The world still applies a definition of “refugee” that is 75 years old and was designed to address mass displacement within post-war Europe. The last major adaptation to the 1951 Refugee Convention was the 1967 Protocol, which extended the geographic scope of the Convention beyond Europe. This is no simple task because the middle powers to which Carney is speaking – including EU countries, South Korea, Japan, Canada and Australia among others – migration and asylum are contentious issues.

The first step in rigorously evaluating legacy agreements and categories of people on the move is to reconsider how the ethics, principles and human rights underpinning the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol can inform a contemporary understanding of why and how people move. Modern immigration rules and laws, including those of countries in the Global South, are built on a colonial logic of racialised securitisation. This is perhaps most visible in the way contemporary borders in the Global South cut across historical routes of migration and mobility that were based on pre-colonial cultural, ethnic and trade interests. Using development cooperation to reinforce these historically unjust border practices simply reinforces the layers of violence and securitisation that constrain human mobility. International cooperation has the tools to rethink the rules and logic of human mobility by fostering more equal exchange and mutual learning among nation-states.

International cooperation should support contemporary examples from African countries by finding ad hoc ways to soften, or even eliminate, border controls in regions where agricultural, trade or seasonal migration has historically taken place. At a regional level, this includes the African Union’s integrated border management strategy (Hlovor, 2020); at the national level, it includes the extent to which mobility is accepted in border regions with overlapping tribal or customary features (Daimon, 2016). This offers a foundation to build upon; it is not the elimination of borders, but a model of spatial governance that recognises human mobility as a healthy and necessary component of environmental stewardship and social production. Instead of migration being an issue of securitisation, this example points to the importance of *facilitating* human mobility. Facilitation does not mean that “anyone can go anywhere”; rather, it means ensuring that policies and regulations align with the idea that migration in its various forms is a normal part of the human experience.

Relevance: development cooperation and the argument for a facilitation-based approach

Migration policy based on facilitation can effectively create social cohesion. Pastoralists in East Africa who can safely move their cattle across a border during the dry season are more likely to trust institutions that are not pedantic about border control (Ncube & Ekoh, 2026). The host community that sees its government efficiently provide refugees with residence permits and access to the labour market is less likely to feel overwhelmed by or resentful towards people seeking protection. The securitisation of human mobility – so central to current debate on migration and displacement – has the opposite effect. The impossibility of truly secure borders damages trust in government, and the cruelty necessary to even attempt this leaves a moral stain. Migration policy that facilitates safe and orderly movement builds social cohesion; migration policy that reproduces the logic of securitisation and racialisation damages social cohesion (Ikanda, Muhumad, & Kuhnt, 2025).

A facilitative migration policy requires international cooperation; no single state can meet the technical or political tasks on its own. Working in partnership, states can find creative ways to solve contemporary migration policy challenges. Such responses could include international cooperation to address the regulatory barriers that prevent fully realised digital labour. As of

now, it is essentially impossible for firms to hire remote workers across borders – laws about taxation and social insurance remain “bordered” and require the physical residence of a worker. Regulatory alignment to enable cross-border digital work is possible (see Erforth & Martin-Shields, 2022), but this requires true partnerships that recognise the economic interests of low- and middle-income countries. It could also include creating liveable cities, an area in which development cooperation can play a key role. Cities are not only hubs of economic and social opportunity, they are also on the front line of providing services to migrants and displaced people (Martin-Shields, Ekoh, & Appiah, 2023). In a world where funds will be scarce, investing in the municipal-level services that make cities of arrival liveable and dynamic is key to facilitating safe and legal migration. Finally, refugee and migrant communities themselves are critical partners in creating policies that facilitate safe and legal movement and settlement. Governments should include refugee-led organisations and diaspora groups in policy development, and they should leverage their experiential knowledge to create solutions that are relevant on the ground. The recent BMZ Reform Plan explicitly mentions the role of diaspora engagement in recovery and reconstruction efforts in post-conflict settings (BMZ, 2026, p. 11).

Just as donor countries want to enjoy the demographic benefits of healthy, growing populations, which are necessary for the maintenance of healthy cities and states, so too do countries in Africa and the wider Global South. This could build on the strongest rights, ethical commitments and principles contained in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reimagining how they inform a facilitative approach to migration and refugee policy in the 21st century. This starts with political actors, particularly in donor countries, having the courage to publicly support development cooperation and articulate a political and moral position that migration and displacement are opportunities to be facilitated, not problems to be securitised away.

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12 The future of democracy promotion

Semuhi Sinanoglu & Julia Leininger

Implications

Democracy promotion is coming under attack from within traditional donor countries. Driven by nationalism and security considerations, governments are deprioritising development aid, including democracy aid. The dissolution of USAID in 2025 – the largest democracy-promotion donor – marks a watershed moment, but it is not an outlier in this global trend, as there have been considerable funding cuts in the United Kingdom and other donor countries. It is not only the level of democracy-aid disbursements, like that of development aid more broadly, that has notably decreased, but also the patterns of these disbursements that have shifted with the changing global order. With geopolitical interests in mind, donors routinely look the other way when strategic partners commit autocratic abuses and human rights violations, thereby giving a persistent advantage to autocrats.

One major implication of these attacks from within is the weakening of institutionalised international cooperation for democracy promotion. With the erosion of multilateralism and geopolitical shifts, issue-oriented club governance is becoming more prevalent. As states withdraw from regional organisations with democracy clauses (e.g. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS) or from traditional democracy-promoting organisations (such as the withdrawal of the United States from UNDEF), democracy promotion becomes increasingly decoupled from organisational membership. The consequence is that democracy promotion loses not just its funding but also its institutional infrastructure. This trend makes it structurally more difficult to track and advocate for democracy within the emerging architecture of international cooperation.

Democracy promotion also faces growing external threats. Authoritarian powers are increasingly disrupting domestic political processes in other countries through cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns on social media, as well as with transnational repression targeting their opponents. They co-opt international organisations, build cross-regional networks and alliances, and support other autocracies materially and diplomatically. They also shape the broader international environment by competing ideologically, presenting their regimes as viable alternatives to democracy (Dukalskis, 2021).

The implications of this external pressure for democracy promotion are severe, and they compound the damage caused by the internal retreat. Authoritarian interference increases scepticism towards the West and deepens cynicism about its motives in other countries. In turn, this provides autocratising incumbents further justification to crack down on civil society, weaken linkages with Western democracies, fuel conspiracism and strengthen nativist support bases, making cooperation for democracy promotion difficult (Coskun & Dueck, 2025).

Relevance

A large body of scholarly evidence suggests that democracy aid is an effective tool for supporting and protecting democracy. Although its effectiveness depends on factors such as aid modality and the recipient country's institutional structures, the overall evidence suggests that democracy aid has a positive impact on levels of democracy (Gisselquist, Niño-Zarazúa, Samarin, & UNU-WIDER, 2021; Leininger & Schiller, 2024). Other studies also show that both the EU's democracy support specifically, and its development aid more broadly, contribute to higher levels of democracy in recipient countries through conditionality (Gafuri, Olmås, & Persson, 2026).

Democracy aid serves donors' commercial interests. Available scholarly evidence shows that foreign aid has a direct and robust effect on donor exports (Martinez-Zarzoso, 2019). This pattern holds for democracy aid as well: It can increase bilateral trade volumes between donors and recipients, both directly through higher export volumes, and indirectly through liberalised trade, expanded investment and trade opportunities, and improved property rights in recipient countries (see Scott & Scott, 2024).

Democracy aid helps protect donors' security interests. Democracies are less likely to initiate conflicts and spiral into civil wars. Democracy aid is particularly effective in mitigating the risk of civil war onset (Savun & Tirone, 2011) and improving democracy levels in post-conflict settings (Reicheneder & Neureiter, 2024). In other words, democracy aid alleviates security risks and irregular migration pressures in donor countries' neighbourhoods (Kelemen & Knutsen, 2026).

That said, democracy promotion as we know it is likely finished. The global wave of autocratisation has fundamentally altered the landscape, rendering traditional approaches to democracy promotion largely ineffective and unsustainable. This is because the logic of democracy promotion has reversed: During the Third Wave of Democratisation, it was to work with the tide towards democratisation; today it works "against the tide" of autocratisation. That is partly why, given international drivers of autocratisation, democracy-protection schemes focused purely on the domestic level might miss the mark (Leininger, 2026). In response, development cooperation (DC) as a sector should recalibrate its strategies, broaden its stakeholder base and cultivate public support.

Contributions

First, democracy aid should aim for protection instead of promotion. The logic of democracy protection is categorically different: Its rationale is to counter autocratisation, rather than fostering democratisation, by slowing democratic regression and preventing institutional erosion through cooperative and coercive means. This is also in line with policy insights from initiatives such as the European Democracy Shield (European Parliament, 2025), which aims to protect European information and electoral integrity. Such recalibration, however, requires an impact assessment of which instruments allow democracy aid to function as a protective measure. Despite evidence suggesting that democracy aid has worked against autocratisation, significant empirical gaps remain regarding which specific approaches are most effective (Leininger, 2026).

This effectiveness depends in part on how these strategies are publicly communicated. Communication targeting recipient countries: Autocrats exploit the gap between the rhetoric and practice of Western democracy aid, exacerbating conspiracism and instilling distrust in democracy-promotion organisations. One countervailing tactic is to be open and transparent about the strategic intent behind aid: Our experimental data offer preliminary evidence that it can reduce conspiracism and increase trust in European organisations in recipient countries (Sinanoglu, 2025). As for communication in donor countries (Rotmann, 2026), the available polling data suggest that, although there is public support for funding cuts, public opinion is quite supportive of maintaining democracy aid abroad. DC should devise communication strategies that maintain and further cultivate this public support by showing how democracy aid can be reconciled with strategic interests, especially for more sceptical groups.

With the international institutional infrastructure for democracy aid crumbling, alternative conditionality mechanisms are required. One alternative is to foster human rights and trade linkages. There is already strong evidence of a positive relationship between trade and democracy (Manger & Pickup, 2016). These linkages could be created through trade agreements with democracy protection clauses, which may include a variety of measures, including collective efforts to fight disinformation or protect electoral integrity. Amid tariff wars

and with renewed focus on promoting the commercial interests of donors, DC could make a case for linking trade with democracy protection.

However, there are two major obstacles to these linkages. First, there may be reluctance among trade officials to include civil society in trade-related negotiations, partly to maintain cordial relations with target governments and also to be able to conclude trade agreements in the first place (Khakee & Weilandt, 2022). Second, although substantial work is being done on economic governance, the way in which the DC sector is organised treats democracy and trade as separate silos, as they are often institutionally handled by different departments. To overcome these obstacles, the DC sector needs to reorganise its internal structures and, more importantly, include non-traditional stakeholders as allies, in particular the private sector.

Research shows that, historically, businesspeople have played pivotal roles in supporting pro-democracy movements. The third wave of democratisation would not have been possible without business actors funding opposition parties, protests and media outlets. Today, too, hundreds of corporate programmes have emerged across democracies to protect different democratic institutions (Sinanoglu, Way, & Levitsky, 2025). The private sector could help alleviate funding gaps in development cooperation, while also bridging the gap across policy domains by leveraging its market influence. To that end, we recently launched a new initiative, Corporate Civic Responsibility in Safeguarding Democracy (#DEMCOR) (IDOS, s.a.), to rethink and revitalise the role of business in supporting democracy.

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13 European cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa amid crisis and war

Amirah El-Haddad, Niels Keijzer & Mark Furness

In recent decades, civil and interstate wars, foreign interventions, repressive rentier-authoritarian political economies and deepening environmental crises have hindered socio-economic development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The Arab Uprisings of 2010-11 revealed the limits of externally supported development models that prioritised stability and technocratic governance reforms while overlooking structural inequalities and exclusion (El-Haddad, 2020). During and after the uprisings, some of the European countries that had been funding autocratic rulers in the MENA region participated in a NATO-led military intervention in Libya that removed its unpopular leader. This contributed to the country's prolonged instability, which has had spillover effects across the Mediterranean and the neighbouring Sahel region. Living standards have stagnated amid region-wide authoritarian consolidation in the decade and a half since the hopes raised by the Arab Uprisings were dashed (Wehrey, 2023). The MENA region's crises are unfolding at a moment of deeper structural transformation in the global economy. Beyond war and authoritarian consolidation, the global order is marked by increasing trade fragmentation, rising barriers, the securitisation of technology, green industrial policy competition and the regionalisation of supply chains. For MENA economies – many of which remain dependent on commodity exports, remittances, tourism revenues and external capital flows – these shifts generate new vulnerabilities alongside selective opportunities for diversification and upgrading. Finally, the MENA region faces the additional challenge of being among the world's most climate-vulnerable regions, while also being particularly vulnerable in terms of access to drinking water.

In this context, the central question is not only how Europe should respond geopolitically, but also how cooperation can help MENA countries adapt to a more politicised and fragmented global order. The region's exposure to energy transition pressures, carbon border measures, financial volatility and shifting trade corridors is reshaping the foundations of MENA economies. As a result, economic resilience has become a structural imperative rather than a purely developmental one. Despite the disenchantment and crushed hopes that followed 2010-11, especially in the context of the brutal Syrian civil war, international partners have remained strongly engaged in the MENA region. The region's proximity to Europe has favoured continued business ties and development cooperation, most recently reframed under the EU's Pact for the Mediterranean (Furness, 2026). A key shift in the region's external cooperation has been the diversification of its international partners. Whereas American and European influences previously dominated the region's international cooperation, most MENA countries have deepened their ties with China since the Arab Uprisings. The MENA region has become a major area of engagement for China's Belt and Road Initiative, notably regarding infrastructure, technology and energy (Andersen & Jiang, 2026). As their trading and investment partners have also diversified, the region's relative share of trade with Europe has declined over time. Another key shift concerns the growing international engagement of MENA states themselves as they assert their own spheres of influence, for example through the United Arab Emirates' and Saudi Arabia's economic and security engagements in Egypt, Sudan and the Horn of Africa, and Morocco's expanding diplomatic and investment presence in the Sahel and West Africa.

According to a recent report, the region has made uneven progress towards achieving some of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially in education, health care and access to water and sanitation (SDSN, 2026). The destabilisation created by the US-Israeli war on Iran, together with Israel's illegal aggression in Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, risks setting even this modest progress back by decades. The development impacts of the violence are being felt across the region. The illusion of stability in the Persian Gulf has been shattered. The United Arab Emirates

in particular has relied on stability as a global connectivity hub and has a foreign-born population of around 90 per cent. Many are now considering leaving and taking their investments and expertise with them. Iran has deliberately targeted foreign investment, attacking American technology companies and data centres. Physical and digital logistics networks are under pressure, and the ambitious India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor initiative has been put on hold. International tourism is being hit particularly hard. The impact on major development processes, such as reconstruction in Syria and Lebanon, is likely to be considerable as foreign investors and development donors re-evaluate their priorities.

What MENA countries want from cooperation with Europe

In the first half of 2025, MENA governments, civil society organisations, business figures and experts were invited – through an extensive consultation process preceding the Pact for the Mediterranean – to articulate to EU representatives their expectations of cooperation with Europe. There was widespread demand for Europe to contribute more to inclusive economic development in southern Mediterranean countries. Europe’s potential to do so through meaningful commitments to rights, sustainability and investment was acknowledged. Local economists have called on the EU to support tangible socio-economic improvements, especially jobs for youth, vocational training, support for small and medium-sized enterprises, and long-term investment in sustainable industries. Environmental concerns across the region were also emphasised. Observers have called for serious commitments on climate adaptation, water security and renewable energy projects that serve local populations (EuroMeSCo, 2025). Concerns have been raised that EU-backed “green” projects such as hydrogen production may primarily serve European energy needs without adequately addressing local vulnerabilities, including water security and agriculture resilience (Schuetze & Woertz, 2026).

With regard to migration, mobility and talent partnerships featured prominently in the consultations, stressing legal pathways, skills-matching and seasonal or permanent work opportunities in the EU. Participants warned against policy approaches that are too focused on migration control (EuroMeSCo, 2025). Many MENA governments treat migration as a transactional issue in their dealings with Europe, effectively using cooperation on border management to secure concessions such as visas or financial support (Dimitriadi, 2025). The investigative platform ENASS documented how EU funding has supported migrant pushbacks, thereby implying the EU’s complicity in human rights abuses (ENASS, 2024). This points to strong demand for the EU to attach human rights safeguards to its funding and to channel resources through civil society actors, not just governments.

Southern partners expressed a strong preference for greater sovereignty in partnership design and recognition of their geopolitical priorities as well as Europe’s. Nevertheless, this preference was not always expressed coherently, as interpretations of co-ownership diverge significantly between governmental and non-governmental actors (EuroMeSCo, 2025). Indeed, although most observers place the onus on the EU, this perspective can downplay the reality, namely that Europe’s ability to support sustainable development is limited, as long as the region’s autocratic, reform-averse governments resist change.

These demands for inclusive growth, sustainability and mobility reflect deeper structural constraints within MENA political economies. Hydrocarbon exporters face the long-term erosion of fossil-fuel rents in the context of accelerating decarbonisation. Diversified middle-income economies struggle to move beyond low-value-added segments of global value chains. Fragile and conflict-affected states risk further marginalisation from emerging regional production networks. International cooperation therefore needs to engage not only governance and rights questions, but also the structural drivers of dependency, limited diversification and weak productivity growth.

Be geopolitical, not just rhetorical

The growing tension between the EU's longstanding self-image as a "normative power" and its more recent aspiration to act as "geopolitical Europe" reflects a shift towards a more transactional and interest-driven external policy that has not delivered corresponding geopolitical influence. By acting "geopolitical", the EU presumably seeks to influence the most consequential political, security and economic dynamics in the Mediterranean Basin and wider Middle East. This ambition has two major dimensions. Diplomatically, the EU and European governments – given that the EU cannot take common positions on international political issues when its member states are divided – need to defend the core principles, norms and institutions of the rules-based international order.

Economically, the credibility of Europe depends not only on its diplomatic positioning, but also on whether it can leverage its economic engagement in support of the local value creation, diversification and resilience that MENA partners are calling for.

The EU has voiced an ambition for greater strategic autonomy from the United States, and it possesses significant diplomatic and economic capabilities to act on this ambition. This needs to be reflected in concrete policies and initiatives in the MENA region. This requires greater efforts to address the most important geopolitical processes in the region, namely the Israel-Palestine conflict and the aftermath of the US-Israeli war on Iran and Lebanon (Costello, 2026). The EU and European governments have done this in the past. European countries played a major role in the ill-fated Oslo Accords in the 1990s, but also in the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (Tocci, 2026). The war with Iran may provide an opportunity for Europe to step up on both of these issues, in part because it may weaken the positions of both the United States and Israel while creating space for greater European diplomatic and economic engagement. European economic cooperation is a key aspect of its leverage. The EU can mobilise humanitarian and development finance as well as external investment, contribute meaningfully to reconstruction, and provide significant, mutually beneficial infrastructure investments. European trade policy, investment patterns, standards regimes and green transition instruments increasingly shape the distribution of risks and opportunities within MENA economies.

Credibility, however, remains a major challenge for European cooperation with MENA countries. The EU needs to demonstrate with its actions that it stands up for the principles, norms and institutions of rules-based international cooperation. Transactional engagements with authoritarian regimes in the MENA region are perhaps necessary in the short term, but they undermine the rules- and rights-based principles that underpin the EU's own legitimacy and long-term influence. European inaction in response to Israeli violations of international humanitarian law in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Iran dilutes the EU's relevance as well as its normative credibility as a defender of the rules-based international order. Ambiguous positions on the use of US military bases have led some observers to consider Europe as a whole to be complicit in the bombing of Iran. This inability to practice what it preaches weakens the EU's moral authority without securing any meaningful geopolitical leverage, thereby reinforcing a pattern of limited influence.

A different approach is conceivable. The EU would be well advised to maintain its offer and capacity to support democratic processes, actors and institutions such as parliaments, independent judiciaries and media. The EU cannot democratise southern Mediterranean countries, but it can stand ready to back peaceful democratic movements that emerge. Maintaining support for organisations such as the European Endowment for Democracy is crucial in this regard. More substantial Global Gateway projects in connectivity, health care and education could demonstrate that the EU can offer larger and more attractive investments. Issues such as better market access – especially for agriculture exports – training programmes with job guarantees, and temporary work visas are all attractive to citizens in southern European Neighbourhood Policy countries, and could also be better leveraged by the EU and its member states.

Strengthening European engagement in this way requires moving beyond transactional arrangements centred on migration control or ad hoc crisis response. It implies closer coordination between trade, development and industrial policies; targeted support for sectoral upgrading and standards compliance; risk-sharing financial instruments that can crowd in long-term investment; and credible commitments to green transition cooperation that address local water, energy and employment concerns. Only by linking geopolitical ambition to structural economic transformation and reliable long-term partnerships can European cooperation contribute to a more resilient and equitable regional order.

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14 South Asia in the changing global order: the case for a bioregional approach

Aparajita Banerjee

South Asia, home to around 2 billion people, is one of the world's most densely populated regions. The region comprises eight countries that differ widely in terms of economic development, Human Development Index rankings and geopolitical power. The region as a whole has recorded economic growth of around 5-6 per cent, with Nepal and Afghanistan as exceptions. Similarly, whereas Sri Lanka and the Maldives rank in the high human development category, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan fall into the medium category, while Pakistan remains in the low category. Geopolitically, India is considered a great power, on par with most G7 countries, though not with the United States (IEP, 2026). However, India's relations with some of its neighbours – including China, which borders South Asia and is a major global power – are often volatile due to border disputes, to the detriment of long-term regional peace and prosperity.

Some of the deep mistrust between neighbours in the region is a legacy of colonial rule, which political leaders continue to repackage for electoral purposes. To promote long-term regional peace and prosperity in a changing global order, it is essential to focus on shared interests rather than only on differences. Looking at the common threads and finding ways to strengthen them is also crucial for increasing regional trade, managing climate change and securing world peace, given that the nuclear weapon states of India and Pakistan are often at war. In addition, this region is home to one of the youngest populations in the world, one that is highly mobile and ambitious. Their perceptions of their place in the world differ greatly from those of older generations. International development cooperation in the region therefore needs to be agile, at eye level and innovative to align with citizens' dreams and aspirations.

International development cooperation should have a regional focus

International development cooperation in South Asia, both within the region and from external partners, should refocus on strengthening regional integration for long-term peace and prosperity. In a recent article, the German Federal Foreign Office recognised the importance of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and noted that tensions between India and Pakistan have prevented the SAARC from realising its full potential. Regional development organisations such as SAARC can be revitalised with bioregional aspirations aimed at greater social and economic prosperity.

One way of looking at South Asia is through the lens of bioregionalism. Defined in several ways in the academic literature (Alexander, 1990; Berg, 1991), bioregionalism is used here to refer to the fluid commonality of social, cultural, environmental and ecological features shared among people in a region that transcend recent political boundaries. Although bioregionalism is often used to understand how to live in a place within a smaller ecosystem, the idea can be extrapolated to the regional context of South Asia. Rather than imagining South Asia as a single bioregion, it can be viewed as comprising multiple bioregions based on cultural and ecological similarities. Such an approach can align conceptually with ideas of a multipolar world, without risking the rise of one hegemonic state in the region seeking to draw other nation-states into its sphere of influence. In this sense, South Asia as a whole could emerge as a pole in the future multipolar order. Imagining such radical alternatives may sound utopian, but it is essential to tackle the current polycrisis. There is no shortage of arguments that the existing rules-based order has failed to protect the interests of the Global South, while a new order has yet to be born; maybe there is a small window of opportunity for wishful thinking.

In the South Asian context, a bioregional approach to tackle a polycrisis is particularly relevant, as many of the region's political divisions, created under British colonial ruler, are less than a century old. The roughly 80 years during which the peoples of South Asia have been divided into nation-states amount to only a brief episode in the region's millennia-long civilisational history, throughout which people and cultures have continuously intermingled. It is prudent to focus on how to build on these existing similarities for greater cohesion among neighbours. In other words, a bioregional approach helps in envisioning regions as collective spaces where people live and share history, culture, language, food systems and natural resources rather than being fragmented by national boundaries.

Bioregionalism for the environment

A bioregional approach is well-suited to South Asia in addressing environmental degradation and managing climate change. Many countries in the region share river basins, oceans, wetlands, forests, mountain ecosystems, biodiversity habitats, and exposure to climate change and its impacts. Mountains, river basins and oceans rarely belong to a single nation, especially in South Asia. For example, the Himalayas, often described as the Third Pole, and the thousands of small and large rivers originating there provide water for millions of people who live in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. However, climate change impacts – especially the loss of snow and ice and the glacial retreat in the Himalayan region – pose severe risks to the millions who depend on glacier-fed rivers for their day-to-day survival.

Regional cooperation is essential to finding a solution to stop the rapid glacial melting in the Himalayas, which will directly affect most South Asian countries. International development cooperation can play an important role in this context by supporting evidence-based projects in sustainable water resource management, nature-based solutions and the development of climate-resilient infrastructure that is managed by local communities. Similar projects across the Himalayan bioregion can create conditions in which the benefits of the whole exceed those from the sum of its parts. Transboundary partnerships among civil society organisations, private-sector actors, land-dependent communities, Indigenous groups and local governments can be established to address the social, infrastructural and technological challenges posed by the rapidly changing Himalayan ecosystem. A current GIZ project in Nepal is an example of supporting local industries in reducing emissions and can be expanded to the trans-Himalayan region (GIZ, 2020).

Some of the greatest impacts of climate change in the region include increased water stress and droughts. However, many major South Asian river basins are shared by two or more neighbouring countries. Countries also share upstream–downstream river relationships (e.g. between Bangladesh and India, and between India and Pakistan), which can create conditions for new disputes or intensify existing ones. A large number of people depend on these rivers for agriculture, inland fisheries and drinking water. Rising pollution, excessive water use and upstream damming of rivers can create conflicts between neighbours. In the short to medium term, climate change, population growth and groundwater depletion are likely to intensify river-related disputes between nations unless they are managed well. International development cooperation can address transboundary river issues by creating water frameworks or implementing existing directives. The current GIZ project on preparing master plans for transboundary rivers between India and Bangladesh is an example of how such projects can be pursued through international development cooperation. International development cooperation actors can help build trust and serve as unbiased mediators.

Apart from the landlocked countries of Bhutan and Nepal, all other South Asian countries share the Indian Ocean. As a result, degradation in the Indian Ocean affects all of these countries. Moreover, as marine resources are shared across the region, their overexploitation can be detrimental to food supplies in many of these countries. Therefore, these countries should work

together to protect the Indian Ocean from pollution, overfishing and illegal fishing, in line with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Current international cooperation efforts, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, can be further strengthened. Regional and international development cooperation can further strengthen efforts to address the transboundary challenges associated with managing these global commons. A bioregional approach can also help identify the commonalities in the ocean- and sea-based cultures and histories of the people around the Indian Ocean, as well as the sustainable practices that have been pursued across the region for generations.

Bioregionalism for economic prosperity

Most South Asian countries share land borders, which can facilitate trade if transport networks are further strengthened. Similarly, cross-border energy trade (CBET) networks based on renewable energy could be expanded by linking countries through transmission infrastructure. Energy-trade platforms can help participating countries broaden their energy-supply capacity and address weather variability in renewable energy production while reducing emissions and meeting the growing demand for rapid and sustainable urban development. To make such CBET initiatives more common in South Asia, trustworthy collaboration is required between nations that are sustainable, as building cross-border energy infrastructure is expensive. International development actors can help bring such cooperation about, as their presence in multiple countries can enable them to act as neutral facilitators of such partnerships. A CBET network between India, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh currently exists and can be further strengthened. The Southern African Power Pool and the Greater Mekong Subregion can serve as examples. Such an approach would also align with Germany's interests in the region, including renewable energy and urban development.

Role of Germany and the EU

A bioregional approach in South Asia could find a natural ally in German and EU international development cooperation partners. The EU, arguably, has adopted a version of bioregionalism that has been working for decades now, albeit not without difficulties. Even so, it provides an example that can be fine-tuned to the South Asian context. SAARC already provides a platform for such ideas to further germinate. However, recurring tensions between India and Pakistan have remained a major obstacle to such efforts. To promote long-term regional peace and prosperity, international development cooperation actors can help these countries look beyond their bilateral challenges. The EU's integration process offers lessons on how countries can look beyond narrow national concerns and cooperate at the regional level. The India-EU Free Trade Agreement is an opportunity for knowledge exchange between Indians and Europeans to raise awareness of how such a union can work.

In recent years, Germany has maintained bilateral relations with almost all countries in the region, at varying levels of intensity. Germany has been a trusted partner for both faster- and slower-growing countries. Its strongest relationships have been with India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, given the sizes of their economies. However, Germany could adopt a more integrated South Asia policy that examines the benefits of engaging the region as a whole and the new possibilities created by increased cross-border exchanges. Germany could play a unique role as a trusted partner to bring the countries together and strengthen common values.

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15 Southeast Asia: quests for autonomy amid great power competition

Jasmin Lorch

Southeast Asia is one of the world's most diverse regions. Its 11 countries¹ have highly varied political systems, including limited democracies, such as Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim democracy; one-party autocratic regimes, such as Vietnam and Cambodia; and military dictatorships, such as Myanmar. (Re-)autocratisation has intensified in recent years (Tan & Kayusa, 2025). Although many Southeast Asian economies are growing rapidly, there are wide economic disparities both between and within them, as exemplified by the technologically advanced, high-income economy of Singapore, upper-middle-income countries such as Malaysia and Vietnam, and lower-middle-income countries such as military-ruled Myanmar. With the exception of Timor-Leste, all Southeast Asian countries are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which primarily seeks to promote regional economic integration and maintains a strong commitment to non-interference in the internal political affairs of its member states (Jones, 2016).

Southeast Asia has long been the site of geopolitical competition between the United States and China, and to a lesser extent Japan, owing to its geostrategic location between South Asia, East Asia and Oceania, with access to both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Traditionally, most Southeast Asian countries have maintained strong economic ties with China, while sustaining intensive security cooperation with the United States.

Implications: geopolitical competition and Southeast Asia's growing quest for autonomy

Chinese expansion, strategic rivalry between China and the United States, and the politics of the Trump administration have affected Southeast Asia in multiple ways. Since the early 2010s, China's growing territorial assertiveness in the South China Sea has left some Southeast Asian countries, in particular the Philippines and Vietnam, concerned about their security and territorial integrity (Crisis Group, 2026). The Trump administration's strategy towards the Indo-Pacific region remains far from clear, as exemplified by the lack of clarity surrounding the planned meeting between Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping (Hass et al., 2026). However, contrary to the signals it has sent to NATO allies, it has not yet explicitly threatened to withdraw from its security alliances with Southeast Asian countries. With China expanding its geopolitical influence and the United States increasingly occupied in other regions, in particular the Middle East, many Southeast Asian countries are nevertheless looking for ways to enhance their strategic autonomy by expanding their economic and security alliances, including with European "middle powers".

When the Trump administration announced up to 49 per cent tariffs on countries in the region in 2025 (most of which were later reduced to approximately 20 per cent in bilateral deals), the expected impact on Southeast Asia's export-reliant economies was significant. Most countries, however, weathered the storm comparatively well, owing to low production costs and robust foreign investments (Foster, Borrett, & Lakshmi, 2026). This situation continued until the US Supreme Court struck down the tariffs and the administration replaced them with a 10 per cent global tariff for a 150-day period, which could be extended. Nevertheless, many Southeast Asian governments are seeking to diversify their trade relations to further reduce their vulnerability to

1 Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-L'Este, Vietnam.

the volatility of US trade and foreign policy, as well as their deep integration into Chinese value chains. At the same time, many Southeast Asian countries were hit hard by the withdrawal of USAID and by the loss of support it had provided for social service delivery and good governance. Civil society organisations (CSOs) have been affected most severely, with some organisations, including leading human rights CSOs, losing more than 50 per cent of their budget (Lorch, 2025).

Relevance: international cooperation with Southeast Asia is in Europe's interest

International cooperation with Southeast Asia is in the economic and strategic interests of Germany and the EU. As Germany seeks to “de-risk” from China and diversify its economic relations (Federal Government of Germany, 2023a, p. 38), the growing economies of Southeast Asia are often viewed as alternative sources of manufactured goods, semiconductors and strategic raw materials such as rare earths. Visits by former Chancellor Olaf Scholz to Vietnam and Singapore, and by President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to Malaysia and Cambodia in 2023 and 2024, respectively, showcased these diversification efforts.

As export-oriented small and middle powers that, like European countries, are deeply integrated into the global economy but cannot match the military strength of the United States and China, several Southeast Asian countries aim to defend the rules-based international order, making them important partners for Europe. Moreover, Europe and Southeast Asia also face, to a certain extent, similar geopolitical challenges due to current political shifts in the United States. Although politically much less integrated, ASEAN can also serve as an important counterpart to the EU on important economic, developmental and cultural issues.

Southeast Asia is severely affected by climate change, yet carbon emissions and dependence on imported fossil fuels are rising in conjunction with economic growth (Jakob & Overland, 2025). Similarly, biodiversity is declining rapidly in many Southeast Asian countries. Accordingly, development cooperation in the fields of clean energy, biodiversity and climate change adaptation constitutes a shared interest for Europe and Southeast Asia. The BMZ's strategy “German development policy with Asia” includes cooperation in these areas among its “cornerstones” (BMZ, 2024).

Economic growth in Southeast Asia has often been highly unequal, making support for vulnerable populations, economic inclusion and social service delivery relevant. In many Southeast Asian countries, however, opportunities for social and economic inclusion are being further limited by autocratisation (Tan & Kayusa, 2025). Accordingly, many governments in the region discourage and even punish critical civil society actors, public scrutiny and popular participation more broadly.

Contribution: the need to navigate dilemmas

Although development cooperation with Southeast Asia is both strategically and economically valuable for Germany and the EU, it is also fraught with dilemmas. Some Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia and war-torn Myanmar, possess significant reserves of strategic raw minerals and rare earth elements. However, these resources are often extracted in ways that are highly damaging to the environment (e.g. Global Witness, 2024). The German National Security Strategy assigns development cooperation the role of both helping to secure German access to strategic raw materials and ensuring that the latter are extracted in a socially and environmentally sustainable way (Federal Government of Germany, 2023b). However, realising this role might prove to be impossible for development cooperation in contexts that lack democratic oversight mechanisms. This is especially the case in autocratic and conflict-affected settings. In Myanmar, for instance, rare earth mines linked to global supply chains for permanent

magnets and batteries are controlled by ethnic insurgents, military militias or Chinese business actors, making the introduction of social and environmental standards tremendously difficult.

Some Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam and Cambodia, have thriving economies and support a rules-based international order, but they are also internally autocratic and staunchly suppress dissent. Making a country such as Vietnam a central partner for German development cooperation (BMZ, 2026, p. 19) might make sense from an economic and geostrategic point of view. However, enhancing economic inclusion by strengthening labour rights – or realising goals such as bolstering civic space and human rights (BMZ, 2024) – is extremely difficult, if not impossible, in a context where independent trade unions, free media and critical CSOs are banned.

Actively promoting civic space and CSOs – as envisaged by the BMZ's reform strategy (BMZ, 2026) – is, in principle, imperative in Southeast Asia's autocratic and backsliding regimes. This is also because civil society actors and free media create a limited measure of transparency in autocratic contexts, where power relations are often opaque, thereby making development, economic and security relations with these governments more predictable for European actors (Lorch, 2025). However, supporting critical CSOs in autocratic Southeast Asia comes with its own dilemmas, as international cooperation may further expose their activities and trigger additional repression.

At the same time, if Germany and the EU want Southeast Asia's diverse governments to view them as reliable partners for defending a rules-based international order, functional cooperation and tangible benefits alone might not be enough. Taking a clear diplomatic stance for international law and avoiding the appearance of double standards is equally important. The failure of leading European politicians to condemn the US intervention in Venezuela, for instance, severely disappointed some Southeast Asian political leaders.

To strengthen people-to-people relations, it would also be important for Germany and the EU to facilitate poverty reduction and social protection among vulnerable groups, as well as to provide support for the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. Many of the latter are stranded in neighbouring countries, above all in Bangladesh, where tensions in refugee camps contribute to political instability. However, such support seems unlikely to continue, given the current budget cuts and the regional reorientation of German development cooperation, which in Asia prioritises economic cooperation, clean energy and environmental issues while de-prioritising work on conflicts, displacement and migration (BMZ, 2026).

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